Journal of open archaeology data

Excavating the Museum: A Dataset of Beni Hasan Lower Cemetery Objects Held in 10 Museum Collections (Garstang Excavations, 1902–1904)

DATA PAPERS

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ubiquity press

ABSTRACT

Following John Garstang's excavations of the Lower Cemetery at Beni Hasan, Egypt (1902–1904), the recovered objects were distributed across museums under the finds-sharing arrangements typical of the period and have remained scattered ever since. This dataset reunites 2,120 object records drawn from 10 of the institutions that received Beni Hasan finds — nine in the United Kingdom (Liverpool, Manchester, Bolton, Rochdale, London, Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh) and one in Egypt (Cairo) — documenting registration number, holding institution, tomb number, object type, material, dimensions, and chronological attribution. Compiled from museum catalogues and first-hand collection visits, and released as open data under FAIR principles, it supports research on Middle Kingdom material culture and the post-excavation dispersal of excavated assemblages.

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KEYWORDS:

Beni Hasan; Middle Kingdom Egypt; funerary archaeology; museum collections; material culture; open data

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Solchaga, M 2026 Excavating the Museum: A Dataset of Beni Hasan Lower Cemetery Objects Held in 10 Museum Collections (Garstang Excavations, 1902–1904). *Journal of Open Archaeology Data,* 14: 25, pp. 1–7. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/joad.224

(1) OVERVIEW

CONTEXT

Beni Hasan is one of the best-documented provincial cemeteries of Middle Kingdom Egypt (c. 2055–1650 BC), located on the eastern bank of the Nile roughly 20 km south of Minya, in the territory of the sixteenth Upper Egyptian nome. The site is conventionally divided into an Upper Cemetery of rock-cut tombs belonging to the provincial elite, celebrated for their painted decoration, and a Lower Cemetery of several hundred shaft burials on the slope below, which forms the subject of the present dataset.

Between 1890 and 1893, Percy Newberry and George Fraser recorded the site for the Egypt Exploration Fund, concentrating on the decorated rock-cut tombs of the Upper Cemetery with the assistance of a young Howard Carter, then working as assistant draughtsman. Their results were published across four volumes between 1893 and 1900 [1–4]. Their attention to the Lower Cemetery was correspondingly brief: they referred to its shaft burials as "mummy-pits," observed that most had already been plundered [1, p. 3], and documented a single undisturbed tomb dated to the Twelfth Dynasty, the contents of which are now lost [2, p. 81; 5, p. 13]. The Lower Cemetery as a whole remained essentially unexplored until the following decade.

It was John Garstang, newly appointed Honorary Reader in Egyptian Archaeology at the University of Liverpool, who made the Lower Cemetery the focus of a dedicated campaign, clearing it over two field seasons between December 1902 and March 1904 [6, p. 25]. Garstang, then only 26, had trained in mathematics at Oxford before turning to archaeology, and had worked with Flinders Petrie at Abydos from 1899. His decision to concentrate on the Lower Cemetery is thought to have been encouraged by his friendship with Newberry [5, p. 15; 7, p. 9]. Garstang worked with a team that included the artist E. Harold Jones, trained at the Carmarthen School of Art and the Royal College of Art, who joined for the second season and combined excavation duties with the role of expedition illustrator, and a large body of Egyptian workmen under the foreman Saleh Abd el-Nebi. An Egyptian assistant, Mahmoud Abd el-Ghêlêl, was appointed specifically to manage the photographic work, developing negatives in a chamber close to Tomb XXXIII, which Garstang had adapted as a field office and base of operations [6, p. 25]. Although Garstang noted in his report that twenty tombs were found intact, only 11 tombs were formally recorded [5, pp. 472–478; 6, p. 79]. Garstang's team cleared 888 tombs across roughly 240 working days — a pace of nearly four tombs per day [5, p. 15; 6, p. 46]. This speed has direct consequences for how the cemetery can be studied today: recording was selective, and the resulting documentation is uneven in coverage and depth.

The burials of the Lower Cemetery consisted primarily of vertical shaft tombs, typically with a small chamber or recess cut at the southern foot of the shaft to receive the coffin and accompanying funerary deposit [6, p. 45]. Garstang dated the great majority of these to the Middle Kingdom, though a smaller number of rock-cut tombs at the site were identified as earlier, belonging to the Old Kingdom [6, pp. 36–52]; he referred to the necropolis as a whole as the "Middle Empire Necropolis," reflecting the terminology of the period rather than the finer Middle Kingdom periodisation used today [6, p. 45].

The excavation was first reported in short preliminary notices in *Man* [8–10] and subsequently as a full monograph, *The Burial Customs of Ancient Egypt as Illustrated by Tombs of the Middle Kingdom* [6], which remains the only systematic report of the site. Its object inventory, however, covers only 411 of the 888 excavated tombs, and even for these the entries are frequently partial, omitting objects that are demonstrably present in museum collections today. The published site plan is schematic rather than surveyed, and contains inconsistencies including at least one tomb number that recurs at three separate locations. Garstang's report includes a pottery typology, illustrated with numbered categories, which suffers from the same lack of precision as the site plan — the accompanying drawings are not always accurate — but which has nonetheless continued to provide a basic framework for identifying and comparing Beni Hasan material in subsequent studies [5, 11, 12]. No specialist in physical anthropology took part in the excavation, however; the report's treatment of human remains is correspondingly minimal, limited to two plates of skeletal measurements covering only 10 tombs. Beyond the report, two further bodies of documentation survive. Around 1,100 glass plate negatives were produced during the fieldwork, of which only 731 survive today. These have since been digitised and organised by tomb in an archive held at the University of Liverpool Library. Archival correspondence, held in the same collection, documents the destinations to which many objects were sent. It includes letters where institutions, asked decades later by researchers Fairman and Kemp about their Beni Hasan holdings, replied that they held no record of any such material — despite earlier correspondence confirming that they had received it [13, pp. 194–195].

A further complication is the dispersal of the assemblage after excavation. Garstang's work operated under the division of finds system, or *partage*, negotiated from the 1880s by Gaston Maspero of the *Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte*, whereby the Cairo Museum retained first choice of excavated material and the remainder was released to the excavating mission for distribution to its funding institutions [7, p. 13]. Garstang pursued an unusually wide distribution policy, advertising surplus objects in *The Times*, an appeal that drew replies from more than 143

institutions as far as Jamaica, India, Australia, and South Africa [5, p. 21; 7, p. 15; 13, p. 13]. Complete assemblages from a small number of undisturbed tombs were kept together and sent to single institutions — the contents of Tomb 116, for instance, went to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, and those of Tomb 723 to the British Museum — but this was the exception rather than the rule. Garstang made some effort to preserve the link between objects and their findspot, inscribing tomb numbers directly onto individual pieces, a practice also used by Petrie. This was not applied consistently, however, and such numbers frequently faded or were lost after an object entered a new collection. Drawing on surviving correspondence and museum catalogues, over 100 institutions across sixteen countries have been identified as holding material from the Lower Cemetery, with the largest single holding, at the Garstang Museum of Archaeology, comprising roughly 1,700 objects.

Once dispersed, the objects were absorbed into institutions that had, before the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century wave of systematic excavation of which Garstang's own dig formed part, built their Egyptian collections largely from unprovenanced material acquired as curiosities rather than through controlled fieldwork. Museums organised this new material along two overlapping lines: a chronological framework derived from pottery seriation, and an aesthetic hierarchy that privileged finely made and decorated pieces over plainer or fragmentary material. Coffins and carved wooden models were correspondingly more likely to be displayed, while pottery and modest domestic or funerary items were more often consigned to storage, where much of it has remained largely unstudied for over a century. This category of material — objects entering museum collections from a systematic excavation, retaining some contextual information but severed from the coherence of their original assemblage — has been characterised and theorised by Stevenson as the "excavated artefact" [13, 14].

No single institution, and no single publication, therefore preserves a coherent record of the Lower Cemetery's material culture. The aim of this dataset is threefold: first, to reunite object-level records dispersed under the division of finds system into a single, machine-readable resource; second, to make this evidence available for further analysis of the Lower Cemetery's funerary assemblage; and third, to provide a foundation for future work reconstructing individual burial groups now split across institutions. Its archaeological significance lies in restoring, at the level of registration data, a body of evidence that has been effectively unusable as a coherent assemblage since its dispersal in the early twentieth century. The 10 collections represented here — a curated subset of the considerably larger number of institutions known to hold Beni Hasan material — were selected on the basis that registration and descriptive data could be directly consulted, either through published and online catalogues or through in-person collection visits. They comprise the Garstang Museum of Archaeology (University of Liverpool), World Museum (National Museums Liverpool), Manchester Museum, Bolton Museum, Touchstones Museum (Rochdale), the British Museum (London), the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford), the Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge), National Museums Scotland (Edinburgh), and the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. The selection was also shaped by practical considerations of access and funding: it reflects the collections that could be visited in person within the time and resources available under the project, together with those whose catalogues could be consulted remotely, and it includes the largest known holding of Lower Cemetery material, at the Garstang Museum.

SPATIAL COVERAGE

Description: Beni Hasan Lower Cemetery, Minya Governorate, Middle Egypt (findspot); object records also describe their current holding institutions in the United Kingdom (England and Scotland) and Egypt.

Northern boundary: +27.94
Southern boundary: +27.92
Eastern boundary: +30.88
Western boundary: +30.85

(Coordinates are approximate and describe the extent of the Beni Hasan necropolis as the findspot of the objects; the dataset itself is not geospatial.)

TEMPORAL COVERAGE

The objects catalogued range in date from the Predynastic period to the Byzantine period, with the great majority dated to the Middle Kingdom, c. 2055–1650 BC: of the 1,313 records carrying a recorded period, 1,037 (79%) are attributed to the Middle Kingdom, with smaller amounts dated to the First Intermediate Period (200 records), the New Kingdom and Late Period (24 records each), the Third Intermediate Period and Ptolemaic Period (5 records each), the Old Kingdom (4 records), and the Second Intermediate, Roman, Predynastic, Chalcolithic, and Byzantine periods (fewer than 5 records each). The remaining 807 records carry no recorded period. The fieldwork that recovered the objects took place between December 1902 and March 1904.

(2) METHODS

STEPS

Records were compiled directly from museum catalogues and, in most cases, from first-hand consultation of the objects and their registration records during collection visits, rather than from Garstang's incomplete published inventory, in order to capture the objects as they are

currently registered and held rather than as originally reported in 1907. For each object, the following information was recorded where available: registration number (and any secondary or historical accession number), holding museum, associated tomb number, object type, material, three linear dimensions (height, length, and width, in centimetres), and chronological attribution.

Chronological attribution followed, where possible, the frameworks established in the principal studies of specific object classes from the Lower Cemetery: pottery was dated with reference to the sequences of Orel, Seidlmayer, and Schiestl and Seiler [5, 11, 12]; wooden models with reference to Tooley's typology of Middle Kingdom funerary models and, more recently, Barker's comparative study of funerary models and wall scenes [15, 19]; and coffins with reference to the sequences established by Willems and, more recently, Hudáková and Siffert [7, 16]. Where an object's date could not be independently established from these frameworks, the attribution given in the holding museum's own catalogue was retained.

SAMPLING STRATEGY

No sampling was applied: the dataset aims to record every Beni Hasan Lower Cemetery object identifiable within the 10 collections covered, based on institutional registers, online catalogues, and in-person collection visits. Coverage of each institution is therefore limited by the completeness of that institution's own documentation rather than by a deliberate selection of objects.

QUALITY CONTROL

During compilation, a small number of data quality issues were identified and resolved. Measurements originally recorded in inches or millimetres, or using a comma as a decimal separator, were converted to a single consistent format in centimetres. One fully duplicated record was removed. Cells with no recorded value are marked with the character "x" throughout the dataset.

Where possible, in-person visits allowed registration data to be cross-checked directly against the physical object rather than relying solely on catalogue entries, which for older accessions are occasionally abbreviated or contain transcription errors carried over from early twentieth-century registers. Where a discrepancy was identified between a museum's documentation system and the object as examined, the value recorded in the present dataset reflects the object as currently registered by the holding institution, on the principle that the dataset should describe collections as they exist today rather than adjudicate between competing historical records.

CONSTRAINTS

The dataset is limited to 10 museum collections and should not be taken as a complete record of the Lower Cemetery assemblage: over 100 institutions across sixteen countries are believed to hold Beni Hasan material [7, p. 13], the great majority of them outside the scope of the present compilation. The bulk of this wider distribution is concentrated in the United Kingdom, with further holdings identified in Germany, South Africa, Australia, the United States, Canada, Switzerland, and Egypt, and single institutions in Belgium, New Zealand, Denmark, Cyprus, Ireland, the Netherlands, India, and France. The 10 collections included here are correspondingly concentrated in the United Kingdom and Egypt; the smaller holdings reported elsewhere are not yet represented, and their inclusion in a future version of the dataset would extend its coverage considerably. A small number of records retain ambiguities inherent to the source documentation rather than introduced during compilation. For example, one record carries a chronological attribution of "Recent" whose intended meaning is not otherwise specified in the source catalogue; dating uncertainty flagged by the original cataloguers, indicated with a question mark, has been preserved rather than resolved. Object type could not be determined for seven records. Only 822 records (39%) retain a legible tomb number, a direct consequence of the inconsistent practice of inscribing tomb numbers on objects during the original excavation and the fading or loss of such marks after dispersal. No photographs of the objects are included in the dataset. Image rights rest with the individual holding institutions, each with its own reproduction and licensing policies, which are not compatible with release under the CC-BY 4.0 licence applied to the dataset. Users seeking images are referred to the online catalogues of the holding institutions, where available; the registration numbers recorded in the dataset allow each object to be located directly.

(3) DATASET DESCRIPTION

OBJECT NAME

The Beni Hasan Lower Cemetery Dataset (file set: museum_list_final_v3).

DATA TYPE

Secondary data (compiled from museum catalogues and collection records); processed data (standardised and quality-controlled by the author).

FORMAT NAMES AND VERSIONS

CSV (UTF-8, comma-separated); XLSX (Microsoft Excel, .xlsx); HTML (interactive, self-contained); Markdown (README.md, data dictionary).

CREATION DATES

19/10/2025

DATASET CREATORS
Marisol Solchaga (compilation, standardisation, and collection visits). Underlying catalogue and registration data originate with the respective holding institutions listed in the Context section.

LANGUAGE
English

LICENSE
CC-BY 4.0

REPOSITORY LOCATION
Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21300715

PUBLICATION DATE
10/07/2026

The dataset is structured as a single flat table, one row per object, rather than as a relational database, in order to maximise compatibility with the widest possible range of analysis software, from spreadsheet applications to statistical and GIS packages capable of importing delimited text. It is deposited as four files (Table 1).

The dataset comprises 2,120 records and 10 fields (Table 2).

(4) REUSE POTENTIAL

The dispersal of the Lower Cemetery assemblage has previously been documented in narrative and analogue form rather than as structured, reusable data. Orel's 1993 dissertation remains the only monograph-length study of the cemetery as a whole, and was the first to systematically trace the distribution of the pottery assemblage across museum collections, but its findings are presented as prose description and catalogue entries rather than as a dataset that can be queried, filtered, or combined with other resources [5]. Subsequent studies of specific object classes — Tooley and Barker on wooden models, Willems and Hudáková and Siffert on coffins — have similarly documented individual object groups without producing a shared, structured record spanning the full range of object types recovered from the site [7, 15, 16, 19]. The present dataset differs from these precedents in format rather than in underlying subject matter: it does not aim to supersede the connoisseurial and typological analysis these studies provide, but to make the underlying registration data — museum, tomb number, object type, material, dimensions, and date — available in a single open, machine-readable file that can be filtered, cross-tabulated, and linked to other datasets in ways that narrative catalogues do not readily support.

This dataset offers reuse potential across several lines of research. For Egyptology and Middle Kingdom studies, it provides an object-level basis for analysing funerary assemblages, material culture, and typological patterns at the tomb and cemetery scale, complementing the pottery-focused analysis of Orel and subsequent studies of specific object classes such as the Beni Hasan coffins [5, 7]. Because the dataset records object type, material, and dimensions in a consistent structured form, it also supports quantitative approaches that are difficult to

FILE NAME	FORMAT	DESCRIPTION
museum_list_final_v3.csv	CSV	Full dataset (2,120 records, 10 fields), open non-proprietary format.
museum_list_final_v3.xlsx	XLSX	Full dataset, Excel format, for users who prefer a spreadsheet application.
beni_hasan_table.html	HTML	Interactive, searchable, and filterable version of the dataset for browser-based use; all data embedded, no internet connection required.
README.md	Markdown	Data dictionary describing all fields, the missing-value convention, and known limitations.

Table 1 (Dataset Description): List of the four files comprising the dataset — CSV, XLSX, HTML, and README — with their formats and a short description of each.

COLUMN	TYPE	DESCRIPTION
Registration Number	text	Primary museum accession number. Number prefixes indicate the issuing institution (e.g. EA = British Museum, JE = Cairo Museum).
Other acc number	text	Secondary or historical accession number, where recorded.
Museum	text	Holding institution.
Tomb number	text	Findspot tomb number, where known (39% of records).
Object	text	Object type or description.
Material	text	Primary material.
Height_cm/Length_cm/Width_cm	numeric	Dimensions in centimetres.
Period	text	Chronological period(s); multiple periods separated by ";".

Table 2 (Dataset Description): Data dictionary listing the 10 fields (columns) in the dataset, their data type, and a description of what each field records.

pursue from narrative catalogues alone — for example, examining whether particular object categories cluster in specific tombs or museum collections as an artefact of the division of finds rather than of the original deposition.

For museum and heritage studies, the dataset offers a case study in the twentieth-century dispersal of an excavated assemblage across institutions, contributing to broader research on the history and consequences of the division of finds system [13, pp. 11, 33–34]. It may be of particular use to museums that hold Beni Hasan material. It is also intended as a companion resource to *Reconstructing the Ancient Past: Digital Access and Visibility of the Garstang Distributed Collection*, a project led by Joanne Fitton (University of Liverpool) and funded through the UK Research and Innovation Research Infrastructure for Conservation and Heritage Science (RICHeS) programme, which is building a bilingual English–Arabic online portal to document, publicise, and map the whole of Garstang's distributed excavation collections across the north-west of England [18]. This project addresses the full range of Garstang's excavations across Egypt, Sudan, and the eastern Mediterranean. The present dataset, focused specifically on the Lower Cemetery at Beni Hasan and extending beyond the north-west of England to include the Ashmolean, Fitzwilliam, British Museum, and Cairo Egyptian Museum holdings, offers a complementary, site-specific resource that can be cross-referenced with the RICHeS portal once it becomes available. For digital humanities and open data research more broadly, the dataset provides a FAIR-compliant, machine-readable resource that can be directly integrated with other object-level datasets from Egyptian excavations. It may also serve as a resource to ongoing fieldwork-based research on Beni Hasan, including the Upper Cemetery recording project directed by Macquarie University's Australian Centre for Egyptology [17], by extending the range of primary evidence available for the site to include museum-held material from the Lower Cemetery.

The dataset is also well suited to educational and teaching use: its flat, single-table structure and open formats make it an accessible entry point for classroom exercises in archaeological data management, museum documentation, or the history of collections, and for student-led research projects examining the division of finds system or Middle Kingdom material culture more broadly.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The dataset described in this paper is openly available in Zenodo under a CC-BY 4.0 licence at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21300715.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

This research involved the study of museum-held archaeological objects and associated documentary records; it did not involve human participants, and no ethics statement is required.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful first to the Australian Centre for Egyptology, Macquarie University, for making this research possible, and in particular to Naguib Kanawati and Karin Sowada. Thanks are also due to Anna-Latifa Mourad, Sara Orel, Angela Tooley and Wolfram Grajetzki for their assistance with questions relating to the cemetery. The author is further grateful to the curatorial and collections staff of all the museums visited in the course of compiling this dataset, and in particular to Diana Nikolova and Gina Criscenzo-Laycock (Garstang Museum of Archaeology, University of Liverpool), Ashley Cooke (World Museum, National Museums Liverpool), Marwa Abdel Razek (Egyptian Museum, Cairo), Helen Beckett (Touchstones Museum, Rochdale), Ian Trumble (Bolton Museum), Campbell Price (Manchester Museum), and Daniel Potter and Margaret Maitland (National Museums Scotland, Edinburgh), for their generous assistance in providing access to collections and registration records. Thanks are also due to Lubica Hudáková (University of Vienna) for her help in identifying the range of museums holding material from Beni Hasan.

FUNDING STATEMENT

This research was undertaken as part of the author's postdoctoral research at the Australian Centre for Egyptology, Macquarie University, under the direction of Professor Naguib Kanawati, within the framework of Australian Research Council (ARC) Grant DP220102637, "Rediscovering the Lower Cemetery at Beni Hassan."

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Marisol Solchaga conceived the project, compiled and standardised the dataset, conducted the collection visits, and wrote the manuscript.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Solchaga, M 2026 Excavating the Museum: A Dataset of Beni Hasan Lower Cemetery Objects Held in 10 Museum Collections (Garstang Excavations, 1902–1904). *Journal of Open Archaeology Data,* 14: 25, pp. 1–7. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/joad.224

Submitted: 13 July 2026 **Accepted:** 20 October 2026 **Published:** 02 November 2026

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