**Final Summary Report**

**Care for the Future: Deconstructing the Grand Narrative**

**23 May 2014**

The Timekeeper Project was funded as part of an AHRC research project called *Deconstructing the Grand Narrative*, summarised as follows:

As museums move away from the traditional didactic model of interpretation which espouses one authoritative narrative around a set of objects, they face the challenge of articulating a plurality of voices, meanings and perspectives in a single prescribed space.

One aspect of this challenge that has received little attention is the concept of time. Museums have traditionally used linear time concepts - chronological timelines, or sociological periods such as king's reigns – as organising frameworks for their narratives. Whether one uses a linear, circadian or cyclical method of presenting time, the use of a particular time concept can function to suppress certain points of view about the meaning and significance of museum artefacts when interpreted for exhibition. For example, placing a series of events along timeline inevitability creates a sense of commensurability between historical experiences that will only be valid from a certain ideological perspective. In fact, the very use of a linear timeline denotes the existence of 'progress' which is a Western invention that does not necessarily concur with notions of time and evolution used by non-Western cultures.

This research will explore different models and devices that influence our experience and understanding of time, from Hegel’s model of history as a tulip bulb to why, for physics, the universe doesn’t all tick to the same clock. This will, in turn, start a discussion about how competing time concepts can be used to present different philosophies, beliefs and ideas in object interpretation and presentation. The overall objective is to make museum interpretation more inclusive and engaging for a range of audiences.

The key research questions and responses revealed through the Timekeeper Project and other associated activities are presented below:

**Research Question #1**: To what extent does reliance on linear time concepts in museum displays limit interpretive opportunities, exclude voices and/or discourage the public from engaging with collections?

**Response**: Our research started with the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology collection. Ancient Egyptians had a concept of time that is somewhat ungraspable in today’s society, and is much debated by Egyptologists. But it is clear that the early Egyptians had a different understanding of time. Some would argue that their sense of ‘pastness’ did not mimic contemporary, Western notions of the past. As a consequence, it is inevitable that the picture of Ancient Egypt that is derived from a linear timeline limits our understanding of the civilisation, maybe in very fundamental ways.

However, there are other, less challenging problems with conventional linear timelines. Not only does the selection of highlight events serve to exclude certain voices from history (particularly when they are replicated and embedded in the classroom and in publications), the compression of time in linear timelines results in misleading associations between people and events. While a timeline might easily demonstrate that the pyramids at Giza came before the reign of king Tutankhamun, it is difficult to reflect spatially, and indeed in any meaningful way for the public, the massive 1,200 year gap between the two. For the people who lived in the time of Tutankhamun, the pyramids might well have seemed ‘ancient’, much as both the pyramids and Tutankhamun seem to us today.

**Research Question #2**. What other time concepts might be employed by museums to give a more complex and multi-layered view of the meaning and significance of objects?

Museum objects are typically displayed within a single time context – that of their original use. In that context, the objects provide valuable direct and indirect evidence of how, for example, ancient Egyptians perceived and recorded time. Yet, the objects have travelled through time and affected people in a variety of ways. At the Petrie Museum, the objects are also evidence of beliefs and practices of the Victorian period when Flinders Petrie and his contemporaries were excavating and collecting ancient Egyptian artefacts. However, the multiplicity of evolving intent and purpose over time is difficult to capture in the single context display paradigm imposed on museums by their physical space.

The Timekeeper in Residence, Cathy Haynes, described the following display concept that would allow an object to be explored using different time concepts:

*“I'd like to make 4 geometries of time as a distillation of the ideas in the project. These would take the form of hand-sized models on little plinths showing: horizontal (timeline of progress), vertical (divine rays), circular (ouroboros/Stoic circles), knotty (Shandy/Bergson) concepts of time. Ideally I'd make these in temporally appropriate material. This could be integrated into a museum display as a reminder that the museum timeline, though deeply useful, is not a universal measure of time, and may not have been shared by the people whose history the museum represents.”*

**Research Question # 3**. How can digital tools be used inside and outside museum spaces to present different concepts of time and create new time relationships between visitors and objects?

Today, museums use a diverse array of digital tools, including websites, social media, digital interactives and digital displays of objects to engage audiences. These tools present concepts of time in our lives in different ways. Externally, websites recount museum events and social media interfaces generate their own cumulative timelines, marked by each contribution, in effect aggregating and archiving recent 'historical' events and responses in edited and semi-edited ways. Unlike conventional single axis timelines, these demonstrate that the pathways of recording time and action may or may not be linear but can involve multiple and potentially more random access points to perceptions of events and times.

Within the museum, digital object-based resources such as interactives and exhibitions offer the opportunity to explore subjects more deeply and to draw together different concepts of time. Conversely, as 'living histories', websites and social media therefore can offer a useful counterpoint to the more structured pedantic edited presentations of time commonly offered through digital interactives and displays.

As a result of this research, the Petrie Museum developed a new digital interactive called *Signs of the Times*. It uses iconic images and 3D images of ancient objects to present a new approach to conveying a sense of the length of ancient Egyptian history. It is common for audiences to compress the millennia of Egyptian history into facile generalizations of what we take to be characteristic images of ancient Egypt, e.g. the pyramids and sphinx, eye amulets, Tutankhamun, mummified animals, camels, etc. without realizing that these iconic images are in fact dispersed on a very lengthy time frame such that a large percentage of ancient Egyptians never would have seen them. Our evaluations, and also published research, suggest that the public is also interested in comparative chronologies and this is incorporated into the interactive. In the interactive, iconic images are placed on a timeline with attention drawn to the intervals of time rather than simply noting dates. For example, rather than just providing dates for the creation of the sphinx around 2530 BC and the burial of Tutankhamun at about 1330 BC, attention is drawn to the fact that the sphinx was already around 1,200 years old when Tutankhamun lived and a similar interval to us today would take us back to Alfred the Great and Viking raids.