

Robert Burkitt expedition records

1102

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University of Pennsylvania, Penn Museum Archives

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Summary Information

Repository	University of Pennsylvania: Penn Museum Archives
Creator	Burkitt, Robert James, 1869-1945
Title	Robert Burkitt expedition records
Call number	1102
Date [bulk]	1913-1930
Date [inclusive]	1903-1939
Extent	1.4 linear feet ()
Language	English
Container	2
Abstract	<p>Robert Burkitt lived and worked in Guatemala for most of his life. A graduate of Harvard University, he first traveled to Central America in 1894 with George Gordon as Gordon's assistant on the Fourth Coban Expedition. Burkitt became enamored with the culture and language of the Maya and never returned to North America. He traveled the countryside, corresponding with Gordon, and collecting items for the Museum under a loosely binding agreement with Gordon and later Horace Jayne. Burkitt's letters and catalogues are rich documents depicting the cultural, linguistic, topological, and historical features of the Guatemala Highlands. Burkitt wrote and worked from the areas of Chama, Chipal, Coban, Senahu, Chiantla, Chocoma, and other areas of the Alta Verapaz region. He produced a detailed catalogue of his discoveries accompanied by photographs and drawings. Among Burkitt's discoveries is the Ratinixul</p>

Vase unearthed in 1923. His work was published in the Museum Journal in 1924 and 1930. Burkitt also wrote about the languages of the Maya, leaving an unfinished grammar and dictionary of the Kekchi language at his death in 1945.

Cite as:

[Item name]. Box [Box number]. Robert Burkitt excavation records. Penn Museum Archives.
Accessed [Date accessed].

Biography/History

Robert James Burkitt, born on January 18, 1869 in Athenry, County Galway, Ireland, was the son of Reverend Thomas Henry Burkitt and Emma Eliza Parsons. At age 14, due to economic conditions, he was sent to live with an aunt in Nova Scotia where he attended Dalhousie College. Burkitt took honors in mathematics there and enrolled at Harvard University to study mining. While he was known as a recluse among the Harvard students, Burkitt developed a friendship with George Byron Gordon based on their shared interests in engineering and their talents in drafting and art. Burkitt received his A.B. from Harvard in 1891.

Burkitt first traveled to Guatemala in 1894 as George Gordon's assistant on the Fourth Copan Expedition. In the five months of the expedition, Gordon instructed Burkitt in the basics of excavation. Gordon returned to Cambridge when the excavation was completed, but it is believed that Burkitt never returned to North America, becoming enamored of the culture and language of the Maya. In his early years in Guatemala, Burkitt visited the Kekchi-speaking Maya who lived in the Alta Verapaz. He wandered the countryside, visiting the Indian villages, learning the different languages and customs of the native people, and following native guides to sacred ruins. Burkitt never established a permanent residence in Guatemala, living with one group of friends or another. He rented an apartment in Guatemala City when business took him there, under his pseudonym, Mr. Brown.

Burkitt maintained a sporadic correspondence with his friend George Gordon who by 1910 was Director of the Free Museum of Science and Art (later renamed The University Museum). Burkitt had attained some recognition for articles on linguistics, "Notes on the Kekchi Language" having been published in American Anthropologist. Burkitt and Gordon entered into an agreement whereby Burkitt would devote a portion of each year to exploring and acquiring artifacts for the Museum for a monthly fee plus expenses. This agreement stood for many years despite attempts to get Burkitt to sign contracts and make changes to his highly eccentric style of work. Burkitt could be critical and prickly in his correspondence especially opinionated about the work of others on the Indian language and changes to his material when published. Burkitt's letters and his Catalogue never fail to contain information on the folklore, ritual, crafts, and language of the Maya. The collection contains regular correspondence with George Gordon until Gordon's death in 1927. Burkitt then kept the Museum apprised of his exploits through letters to Miss

McHugh, the Treasurer. When Horace H.F. Jayne took over as Director, Burkitt communicated with him. In addition to letters and records relating to shipments to the Museum, Burkitt kept extensive catalogue entries for each item accompanied by references to geography and the excavation process connected to their discovery. Photographs depict the sites, stages of excavation, and objects discovered. Many of the pictures are mounted by Burkitt. His own discoveries are accompanied by photographs of items purchased from collectors.

Burkitt discovered The Ratinlixul Vase, recovered in 1923. His works, published in the Museum Journal, included "A Journey in Northern Guatemala" in 1924 and "Excavations at Chocola and Explorations in the Highlands of Western Guatemala" in 1930.

Burkitt's interest in linguistics was ever present. He worked for many years on a grammar and dictionary of the Kekchi language; "investigating grammar in my own way". This work was not completed when he suffered a fatal stroke in 1945. Burkitt's papers were thought to be lost until Elin Danien, then Coordinator of Museum Events, visited Guatemala in 1985. Danien contacted relatives of Kensett Champney, a friend with whom Burkitt lived, and discovered that some early notebooks were indeed still in the family's possession.

Burkitt is buried in the British Cemetery in Guatemala City.

Scope and Contents

The Robert Burkitt Excavation Records consist of 1.4 linear feet of correspondence, catalogues and reports, photographs, and notes and studies on the collection. The records have been compiled from the material sent to the Museum by Robert Burkitt from his exploration and excavations in Guatemala during the years 1913 through 1939 and the work on the collection by J. Alden Mason. Notes on the collection by William R. Coe comment on Burkitt and the work of Mary Butler, an expert on the pottery of the region. Studies of the collection by students of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania are also included.

The correspondence from Burkitt to the Museum is arranged chronologically. His catalogue and reports contain catalogue numbers that are not chronological but are referenced to his letters. The photographs, numbered from 101 to 326 then 804 to 807 were divided into folders using the numbers. Mason's notes are undated but those from William R. Coe date from 1953. The studies on the collection are from 1977 and 1978. Mason's notes were divided into three folders, a notebook, a chart and chart notes, and notes on Chama. Coe's material was also divided into folders of notes, photographs, and drawings.

The correspondence series reflects Burkitt's tendency to write infrequently, mostly to his friend George Gordon, and with a great attention to detail. Some letters are very long and contain information on his travels in the area. Burkitt included drawings and comments on the existing maps of the areas. Political commentary is sometimes included and Burkitt shows worries about the security of the mail to and from the museum. At times, the letters are lists of objects being sent to the museum, lists of expenses, and shipping information. Communications are written from Coban, Senahu, San Cristobal, Chiantla, Verapaz and the ruins near Chipal. Later letters come from Ciudad Guatemala and Belize.

The letters from the period 1924 to 1926 are sometimes accompanied by responses from George Gordon which have been photocopied from Gordon's collection of letters. (see Letters G.B. Gordon-Burkitt, Special Collections, Bound Volumes, Letterbooks, G.B. Gordon).

A separate folder was created for one correspondence from Robert Burkitt's father, J.H. Burkitt, to the Museum dated 1915. Reverend Burkitt sought information about the whereabouts of his son. The

Catalogues and Reports of the Robert Burkitt excavation records contain descriptions of all of the items sent to the Museum from the Guatemala sites. All entries in this folder are hand-written in phonetic English. The notes are in good condition and accompanied by small, exquisite drawings of the items. Divided into three columns on each page, the first column contains the number assigned by the museum, the second, the number of the item assigned by Burkitt in numerical order, and the third a description of the item. The first portion of the catalogue consists mostly of pottery. Burkitt often writes several pages of information about an object or region.

Burkitt's later entries are type-written in the same phonetic style. For these entries, Burkitt makes use of hand-drawn maps of the area showing the arrangement of the mounds and graves in it. He includes rubbings of fragments, carvings, and pots found. Burkitt refers to the number of the photograph in the collection which corresponds to the item of the dig.

The original photographs of Robert Burkitt are contained in envelopes or mounted by Burkitt on heavy paper with notes and encased in mylar. Pictures of the objects are usually mounted. Burkitt meticulously referenced the photos to the text of the catalogue. In addition, the negative numbers are provided on the back of many photographs. The photographs depict the regions of Chocoma, Kixpek, Ratinixul, Belize, Quatsoltenango, San Vicente, El Castillo, Alta Verapaz, Aintun, the Sayte River region, Coban, Xolchun, and Kuchumata, among others. In addition to objects found by Burkitt, there are also photographs of items from the Kanter Collection, part of another "private collection in Polo Gordo", and the collection of Henry Kummerfeldt.

Four folders contain photographs related to Burkitt's correspondence with George Gordon in July, October, and November 1913. One folder of these photographs is undated. Material published in the Museum Journal in 1918 and 1930 are contained in a separate folder, with negatives for only a few. The negatives, in envelopes, may reflect a need for conservation assessment.

Notes and Studies on the Collection are contained in eight folders. The material reflects comments and charts by J. Alden Mason and notes from William Coe. Coe's notes relate not only to Burkitt but also to Mary Butler, a research associate at the University of Pennsylvania who was an expert on the pottery of the Maya Indians of Guatemala. The mounted drawings of pottery included with this series are believed to be part of Mary Butler's work. Many of the drawings are numbered and are from Chipal and Chama. A separate "analysis" of a "small tubular object" (# 11258) by A.E.Parkinson is also contained with the series on notes and studies.

The series also contains hand-written course notes and papers written by students for the class, "W. Coe Anthropology Class: Studies of Burkitt and Butler". The papers deal with the sites at Tambor, Kixpek, Chama, Chicun, San Pedro Carcha, and an analysis of Mary Butler's excavations and work in Guatemala. Site diagrams are present for the San Pedro Carcha area.

Administrative Information

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Finding aid prepared by Jody Rodgers.

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Controlled Access Headings

FORM/GENRE(S)

- Card catalogs
- Correspondence
- Photographic prints
- Photographs

PERSONAL NAME(S)

- Burkitt, Robert James, 1869-1945
- Butler, Mary, 1903-1970
- Gordon, G. B. (George Byron), 1870-1927
- Jayne, Horace Howard Furness, 1898-1975

SUBJECT(S)

- Archaeological expeditions
- Archaeology--History
- Excavations (Archaeology)
- Maya language

Collection Inventory

CORRESPONDENCE, 1903-1939.

	Box
List of letters to Robert Burkitt.	1
Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (1 of 10) 1904-1913.	1
Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (2 of 10) 1913.	1
Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (3 of 10) 1914-1915.	1
Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (4 of 10) 1916-1917.	1
Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (5 of 10) 1918-1919.	1
Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (6 of 10) 1920.	1
Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (7 of 10) 1921-1923.	1
Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (8 of 10) 1924.	1
Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (9 of 10) 1925.	1
Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (10 of 10) 1926.	1
Robert Burkitt to George Gordon and Miss McHugh 1927.	1
Robert Burkitt to Miss McHugh 1928-1929.	1
Robert Burkitt to Horace Jayne and Miss McHugh 1930-1932.	1

Robert Burkitt to Horace Jayne and Miss McHugh 1933-1939.	1
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Letter of Rev. J.H. Burkitt (father of Robert Burkitt) 1915.	1
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NOTES AND STUDIES ON COLLECTION, 1953-1978.

	Box
J. Alden Mason notes (1 of 3) 1953-1978.	4
J. Alden Mason notes (2 of 3).	4
J. Alden Mason notes (3 of 3).	4
William R. Coe Notes on Burkitt and Butler (1 of 3).	4
William R. Coe Notes on Burkitt and Butler (2 of 3).	3
William R. Coe Notes on Burkitt and Butler (3 of 3).	Box 3
Kixpek, El Quiche, Guatemala.	
The Burkitt Excavations at Chama; A Preliminary Report.	
The Robert Burkitt Skeletal collection from Highland Guatemala.	
William Coe Anthropology Class Studies of Burkitt and Butler.	

CATALOGUES AND REPORTS, 1913-1930.

	Box
Checklist of numbers and provenience.	2
Catalogue numbers 1 to 99 (1 of 12).	2
Catalogue numbers 100 to 200 (2 of 12).	2
Catalogue numbers 201 to 331 (3 of 12).	2
Catalogue numbers 332 to 623 (4 of 12).	2
Catalogue numbers 624 to 786 (5 of 12).	2
Catalogue numbers 787 to 803 (6 of 12).	2
Catalogue numbers 804 to 811 (7 of 12).	2
Catalogue numbers 812 to 962 (8 of 12).	2
Catalogue numbers 962 to 1090 (9 of 12).	2
Catalogue numbers 1091 to 1109 (10 of 12).	2
Catalogue numbers 1110 to 1115 (11 of 12).	2
Catalogue numbers 1116 to 1154 (12 of 12).	2
Typed Draft of "Explorations in the Highlands of Western Guatemala".	2

PHOTOGRAPHS, 1913-1930.

Box

Photographs 101 to 156 (1 of 8).	2
Photographs 157 to 203 (2 of 8).	2
Photographs 204 to 243 (3 of 8).	2
Photographs 244 to 261 (4 of 8).	2
Photographs 262 to 287 (5 of 8).	2
Photographs 288 to 326 (6 of 8).	2
Photographs 804-1 to 804-24 (7 of 8).	2
Photographs 804-25 to 807 (8 of 8).	2
Miscellaneous and unidentified.	2
Photos relating to letters of Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (1 of 4).	2
Photos relating to letters of Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (2 of 4).	2
Photos relating to letters of Robert Burkitt to George Gordon (3 of 4).	2
Photos relating to letters of Robert Burkitt to George Gordon, undated (4 of 4).	2
Museum Journal.	2
Negatives.	2

MAPS AND PLANS.