THE BIRTH OF THE FITCH LABORATORY

In 2004, the Fitch Laboratory of the British School at Athens celebrated the 30th anniversary of its founding. To mark the occasion, the following Annual General Meeting of the School on February 9th 2005 was addressed by Dr Evangelia Kiriatzi, the current Director of the Laboratory, under the chairmanship of Dr Hector Catling, Director of the School in 1974. Dr Catling gave an account of the circumstances leading to the creation of the laboratory and this account is, by invitation, reproduced here.

WHEN I was invited to act as Chairman this evening, I was asked to make a short address, bearing in mind that the meeting celebrates thirty years of the Fitch laboratory. I shall tell the story of the Laboratory's birth, as I remember it.

It starts in a 'once upon a time' kind of fashion, when Mr Sinclair Hood was Director of the School, much preoccupied with Minoan archaeology. He needed to solve a tricky problem of ceramic identity: 'is it Minoan, or is it Mycenaean?' He discovered that his problem might be solved in Oxford, in the quite newly established laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, Director Dr E. T. Hall, Deputy Director Dr M. J. Aitken. So Mr Hood brought pottery samples, some from Knossos, some from Mycenae, and arranged with a young man working in the Ashmolean Museum to follow up the progress of the experiment that the laboratory had agreed to undertake. Neither Dr Hall, nor Dr Aitken was directly involved in the investigation, though they are important figures in what follows. The bench work and subsequent statistical analyses were done by Mrs Eva Richards (later Lady Richards) and Mrs E. A. Blin-Stoyle. Now, the experiment was successful, showing that chemical analysis of these two sets of potsherds could point to a difference in the trace elements in the Knossos lot from those in the Mycenae lot. Nobody could have predicted the fateful nature of that result.

One of the consequences was to bring the School to the attention of Hall and Aitken. Not long after this there took place the first of several very important meetings over meal-times (though their importance was not always seen at the time). Dr Hall, Fellow of Worcester College, dined one night with Professor Leonard Palmer, scourge of Linear-B chronology, also a fellow of Worcester. Palmer was in the thick of his deconstruction of Knossian Linear-B chronology. He must have brought up the topic of the storage stirrup jars found by Keramopoulos in Boeotian Thebes, conspicuous for the Linear-B texts painted on them. Hardly had he finished describing these jars and saying how useful it would be to know where they came from when Dr Hall waved a wand, as it were (something at which he was very proficient), which meant that: (*a*) the School in Athens immediately obtained permission from the Greek authorities for twenty jars to be sampled, (*b*) a member of Dr Hall's staff accompanied by an Ashmolean archaeologist was wafted out to Athens overnight, and (*c*), within five hours of arrival, into a Hertz car, hastening north to Thebes, accompanied by the appropriate Greek official. The samples were taken and, after a suitable interval for recovery, the two returned to Oxford with the samples and a Theban control, just in time for Christmas. Again, Dr Hall and his Laboratory had been made aware of the British School and its obvious capacity to match his for getting things done.

This relationship between Greece and the Oxford Laboratory continued, though not in quite such dramatic form, throughout the 1960s, chiefly through the medium of ceramic analysis. Its fruits are to be seen in a series of jointly authored papers in the Laboratory's journal *Archaeometry* and the School's *Annual*. Richards and Blin-Stoyle left the Laboratory early on, and were replaced by Mrs Anne Millett.

The Oxford laboratory always distinguished between the research element in its work and the service element, meaning by the latter the routine application of well-tested procedures to archaeological problems. Its greater concern was research, developing new procedures, designing new equipment, and applying scientific principles not previously used in archaeology. By the late 1960s, its ceramic analysis had become service work; there could have been a danger it would be discontinued. But that never happened. Instead something totally unexpected was proposed.

It started at another of the all-important meal-time meetings, this time between Martin Aitken and the Director-elect of the Athens School, who, as it happened, were both Fellows of Linacre College. During the meal, Aitken floated the idea that the School in Athens should establish a Laboratory of its own that could be in very close scientific contact with Oxford, undertaking much of the work on Greek ceramic analysis.

For the time being, the Director-elect kept his own counsel. Presently, he became the Director; in due course, he cautiously approached his Chairman with a draft scheme for a small laboratory at the School. Vincent Desborough was an indulgent Chairman. He encouraged the preparation of a more detailed proposal that could be considered by the Managing Committee. At the same time, he agreed that an informal approach should be made to the Greek authorities to obtain their consent not only to the establishment of the laboratory, but to its future operation. So the next step was a formal call upon the Inspector-General of the Archaeological Service, Professor Spyridon Marinatos, in the rarefied atmosphere of his office in the Ministry of Culture. In response to the explanation of what was intended, he requested a formal application that could be presented to his Council, which was duly done, and formal approval received. The senior Athens staff had been in the secret for some time; they were musing on the physical adjustments that would have to be made if the Laboratory actually happened.

By now the Managing Committee had been fully briefed. Members knew where it would be located, what staff it would need, what the major items of equipment would be, of what kinds of investigation this equipment would be capable. It had a budget for anticipated capital expenditure, and the foreseeable annual recurrent costs. The Committee shared this information with the British Academy, which, to its great credit, said that though it had no funds to assist with capital expenditure, it would meet the recurrent expenditure if the School was successful with the rest. All this time, Hall and Aitken continued their support, listing the gifts of equipment the Oxford Laboratory would make, and promising not only to help select the first Research Officer but also to train whoever was appointed in the use of the specific equipment he/she would find in Athens.

Unsurprisingly, and healthily, there was at least one dissenting voice in the Managing Committee, leading to another important meal-time meeting here in London between him and the School Director. The perfectly valid point was made that such a laboratory, with modest funding, would never solve the financial problem of replacing outdated equipment. As things turned out, the objection was well made, but could not take account of the astonishing generosity of the Laboratory's future benefactors. The Committee did not flinch.

Then the venture entered the doldrums. Efforts were made to raise money in London, and gifts were received, but there remained a huge shortfall (by the standards of the time) of £10,000, without any credible way of meeting it.

Then, quite by chance as it seemed, there took place the last of the key meetings over a meal-table. Somehow, Martin Aitken found himself at dinner alongside Dr Marc Fitch, whose generosity to the School had already been experienced at the time of the building of the Stratigraphic Museum at Knossos. Somehow in the course of dinner, the subject of the School and the proposed laboratory came up, and Martin Aitken must have alluded to the financial obstacle, no doubt exhibiting signs of resignation. At which point Marc Fitch apparently asked, loudly, 'Why haven't they been to me?' The outcome was that Marc Fitch and his equally generous wife Ismene met all the capital expenses of creating the laboratory, whose birth followed soon after. Possible difficulties surrounding the reception of the scientific equipment melted away when such matters were handled by the Embassy at the instigation of Sir Robin Hooper, HBM Ambassador.

On 29 November 1974, with Dr Richard Jones installed as Research Officer, the building converted from its previous role as an apotheke, the equipment installed and humming gently to itself, Sir Robin Hooper's successor, Mr Brooks Richards (as he then was) formally declared the Laboratory open, revealing that its name was 'The Marc and Ismene Fitch Research Laboratory'. The ceremony was attended by the Fitches, senior Greek archaeologists, and members of the community of Foreign Schools in Athens. Marc Fitch was overheard saying to the Ambassador 'Well, that's another job done!' To be absolutely truthful, it was another job that was just beginning.

The Laboratory has had many extremely generous benefactors who have built on the work of the Fitches: I think in particular of Mr Charles Williams and Dr Malcolm Wiener. But at the end of what I have had to say let us make sure we remember the role of those who caused the dawn to rise over the laboratory, and did the best they could for it, in their different ways: Martin Aitken, Peter Corbett, Vincent Desborough, Teddy Hall, Sinclair Hood, Sir Robin Hooper, Spyridon Marinatos, and Neville Williams.

H. W. CATLING

Οι πρόγονοι από παλιά
χαράξανε το δρόμο
και κάθε δωδεκάμηνο
εβγάζαν έναν τόμο

Το έργο μας σιγά-σιγά
τα ράφια τα γεμίζει
κι η κόκκινη επετηρίς
εφέτος κατοστίζει.

P. H.

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