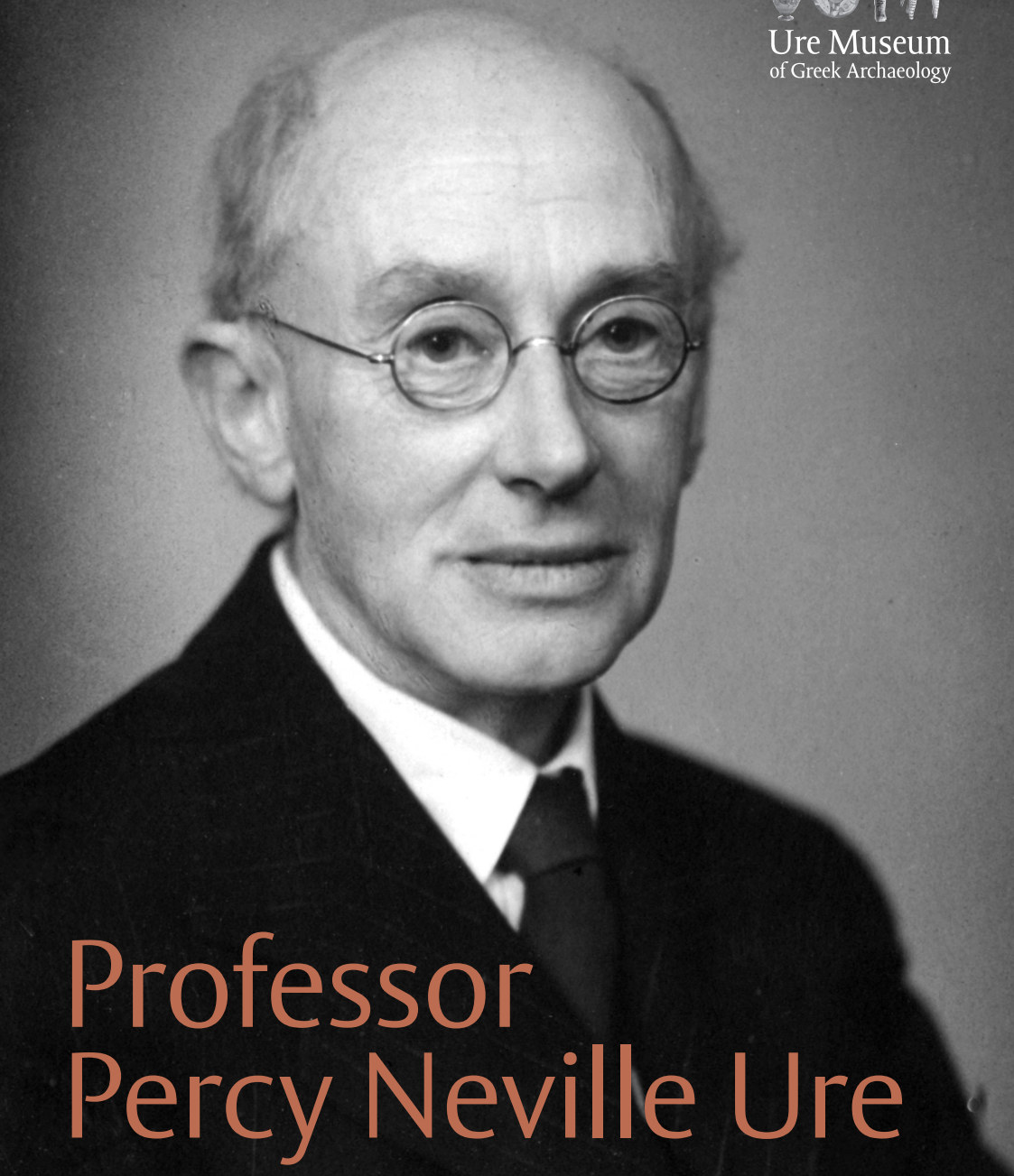




Ure Museum  
of Greek Archaeology



# Professor Percy Neville Ure

1879–1950



University of  
Reading

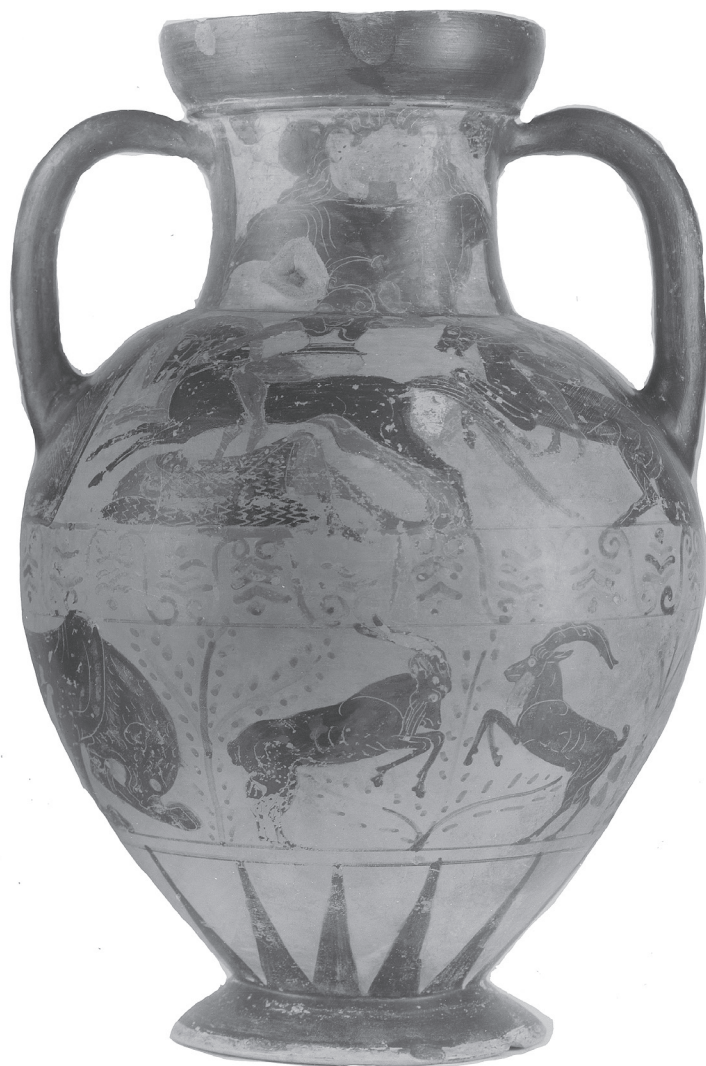


## A Short Biography of Professor Percy Ure

Professor of Classics and ancient history, Boeotian archaeologist, and co-founder of the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology, University of Reading.

**Commemorating 100 Years of Greek and  
Egyptian *Antiques* at the University of Reading  
1909–2009**

Sally Fox 2009, revised edition 2013



**High archaic Etruscan amphora, 6th century BC**, attributed to the Tityos Painter [47.6.1]. This very rare piece was purchased by Percy Ure in London 1947. He spotted its description in a catalogue. Like many artefacts of the time it was in pieces but he felt it was worth a look and realised then that it was special.

Even today it remains one of the few examples of this particular ware known, incorrectly, as 'Pontic' (because it was earlier thought to have been made in the Black Sea region). It may depict a slightly recast exported version of the Greek story of the death of Troilos, the young Trojan prince, at the hands of Achilles. See the 'Greece' case in the Museum.

**Percy Ure contributed much to the classical world without achieving, during his lifetime, the acclaim he deserved.**

His lack of 'private means' did not deter him from raising the funds and finding the time to excavate 145 graves in Rhitsona, Greece, while earning a living as Professor of Classics at the University of Reading. His contribution to the field of Boeotian archaeology, his method of work and relationships with Greek and other international archaeologists and statesmen in the turbulent years between the two World Wars earned him a place in history.



**Wooden Model of a Nile Boat.** Middle Kingdom (12th dynasty), 1938–1759 BC [E.23.2]. From the Tomb of Officials at Beni Hassan. This artefact was donated to what was then Reading College by Lady Flinders Petrie in 1909. See the 'Egypt' case in the Museum.



**Percy Ure's friend and former colleague E.R. Dodds described him as follows:**

A less bossy boss than Percy Ure it is impossible to imagine. He was free from any slightest touch of professional pomposity in word or action; he conducted his small department on strictly democratic lines, anxiously trying to ensure that no one was overworked and that each of us had the sort of work best suited to his or her

tastes and talents. His own interests were mainly Greek history and archaeology, but the class which he invariably reserved for himself was the class for beginners in Greek to which he rightly attached the greatest importance, seeing in it the best chance of preserving Greek as a university subject outside the narrowing circle of public-school boys... a circle on which Reading did not draw...Ure was the gentlest and least self-assertive of men, totally devoid of the petty rancours which appear endemic in the teaching profession... I think of him as one of the saints of scholarship. Greek, he said once, should be an experience, not an accomplishment.

*Missing Persons: an Autobiography. Oxford 1977.*

**It is easy to see from this affectionate profile that the Ure Museum was born from a passion for the classical Greek world.**

Percy Ure was a man totally dedicated to the scholarly life and was highly respected among classicists. His other passions were nature and walking over the Berkshire Downs. This was to be fortuitous: during the General

Strike of 1926, he and his wife Annie chose to walk home from London to Reading, a distance of roughly fifty miles, rather than use public transport and be seen as 'black-legs'. He served as a member of the Greek Archaeological Society, the German Archaeological Institute, the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies and advisory committee of the British School at Athens. He is mentioned in *Who's Who, Alumni Cantabrigienses*. pt. II vol. VI Venn 1954 and his life's work is covered in the *Dictionary of British Classicists*, Ed, R.B. Todd, 2004.



**Plaster Casts of the 'Ludovisi Throne' and the 'Boston Throne'** donated to the Ure Museum in 1929 from the estate of Edward Warren. The original 'Ludovisi Throne,' c. 460 BC, made of marble, was found at the Villa Verosini in Rome, where the gardens of Sallust were once located. It is thought by some to depict the birth of Aphrodite, although some believe it to be Persephone returning from the underworld.



Percy Ure was born in Stoke Newington, London, on May 10th, 1879, the eldest of four sons. His father, Alfred Ure, was a Mount Pleasant postal worker who married his boss from the telegraph department. As a result of this, the parents used to tap to each other in Morse code to communicate anything the boys were not allowed to hear. Percy later talked with his wife in Greek for the same reason, although his children's bedtime stories were of Greek history and myth. Percy was educated at Parmiter's Grammar School, Bethnal Green.

He won a two-year scholarship to the City of London School and went on, in 1898, to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. There he obtained a first class in each part of the Classical Tripos (1901, 1902; MA 1911) and specialised in archaeology at Part II.

**Greek (half of a double) aulos,** made of silver and bronze, sheathing an inner layer of bone. probably 4th century BC [67.73]. See the 'symposium' case in the Museum.

In 1903 he was appointed as an assistant lecturer in Classics at Cardiff University. Between 1908–1910 he moved to Leeds University, and finally arrived at Reading College in 1911, when he was appointed as their first Professor of Classics. In 1907 Cardiff University and the Worts fund awarded him a grant to visit Greece in order to collect Archaic evidence of the history of tyranny. This project was sidelined, however, as Percy fell under the spell of his Professor at Cardiff, Ronald Burrows, later to become Principal of King's College, London. This acquaintance was to affect the rest of Percy's life.



**Rhitsona Grave 130 (right), 6th century BC.** This grave had fragments of large iron nails amongst the pottery denoting the use of a wooden coffin.

Professor Burrows was a keen historian and archaeologist who had first set foot in Boeotia in 1905. He invited Percy to join him at his archaeological digs in Rhitsona, Greece.

For three seasons, between 1907 and 1909, they excavated part of a 6th century cemetery which was thought to belong to the ancient city of Mykalessos, mentioned in Homer's *Iliad*, book 2 and Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, book 7. Burrows heard about this site from the local tomb robber, Aristeides, who really wanted the booty for himself. Burrows wrote in a letter to his brother, Basil, in 1907: 'he naturally didn't want me to come here, but I have made a bargain with him, and he is with me here, getting so much for every tomb he finds for me. It is a great and special art, like finding wells'.



**Percy and Ronald worked alongside the distinguished archaeologist and Ephor of Antiquities for Boeotia, A.D. Keramopoulos.**

Percy wrote in his preface to *Aryballoi and Figurines* (1934), 'It is due to him that the complete finds from each of our graves are exhibited as a unity in the cases of the museum at Thebes.' The graves themselves were nearly all shaftgraves (pits, dug out of the earth), but some were tile-graves (lined and/or covered with tiles), ranging in depth from 0.5-2 m. The remaining furniture and bones lay on naked earth. In some the contents had been cremated *in situ* but these were usually infant burials. All were single burials.

The successful excavations were continued each year from late Spring, when time, teaching schedules and the political situation allowed (the monarchy in Greece was under constant threat). The contents of each grave, some dating to the Geometric and Corinthian periods (7th and 6th centuries BC), were carefully studied and catalogued *in situ*, even down to the smallest sherd, and the chemical balance of the soil. Each pot was carefully cleaned and pot menders were hired to stick them together. They were then photographed, catalogued and stored. Many were eventually displayed in the Thebes Museum, where they remain on display today.



**Grave 88, 6th century BC**, had a sarcophagus of stone. A stone olive press covered the head and torso, while another stone covered the lower part of the body.



**Mending the pots.** Ronald Burrows (left), with Y. Bakoulis, Mr Kontogheorghis and his son, at the mender's table in the Thebes Museum.



**Annie Dunman Ure** (nee Hunt) 1893–1976, first curator of the Ure Museum (1922–1976).

Ronald Burrows' untimely death in 1920, at the age of fifty-three, left Percy in sole charge of the Rhitsona excavations, which he continued with his wife and former pupil, Annie Dunman Hunt. They had met at the University of Reading and married in 1918.

It is thanks to Annie, known as Nan, a prolific note-keeper and diarist, that we have such vivid insights into the daily working conditions sustained by these pioneers. Travelling through Europe 'en route' gave them time to visit places such as Pisa and Florence and purchase the odd pot or two, but it was not an easy journey. Cramped conditions, sea-sickness and upset stomachs were frequent inconveniences and it is to their credit that the Ures persevered with their task.

When they finally arrived in Greece, a permit was required before any work could begin and, when granted, it was on condition that they employed local citizens, many of whom were tomb robbers (a punishable offense). Rather curiously these casual workers not only knew where to find graves, but also seemed to know whether or not a grave would be empty (an observation made by Annie Ure in one of her diaries).



**Terracotta monkey (or man) on horseback**, middle of the 6th century BC [22.9.8]. Many such items were sold by peasants who scavenged the sites for the tourists. The export of these items was strictly forbidden unless suitable paperwork was obtained. See the 'Warfare' case in the museum.

Accommodation was also a problem, as even the hotels in Athens were ridden with fleas and bedbugs who gave them some lively nights. 'Caught 22 fleas on myself before midday. After that I stopped counting' said Annie. They were frequently sick with fever or indigestion or lack of sleep from the heat and the fleas. Percy suffered a prolonged bout of toothache, which was finally cured by a dentist in Athens who replaced two roots.

The accommodation at Rhitsona was no more than a shepherd's hut. It lacked electricity but that allowed the film developing to be always left until late at night, when it was naturally dark. The cataloguing was a slow process as 'great pains were taken to preserve the records of the places occupied by the various objects in each grave, and this could be done only by constant supervision of the menders and by making them clean and mend the objects in small instalments' (P. N. Ure, *Sixth and fifth century pottery from excavations made at Rhitsona*. London 1927).

The full contents of each grave were carefully kept together and, in one instance, this amounted to some 447 items. Although this system of storing and cataloguing is common practice today, P. Orsi, the groundbreaking Italian archaeologist had only recently introduced the system of excavating and keeping tomb groups intact. Percy's contemporary, archaeologist Humfry Payne, caustically remarked 'the presentation of the whole is complicated by the establishment of innumerable minor categories and subdivisions,

many of which are not of the smallest interest or importance' *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 47 (1927), 306–307. Another critic, Martin Robertson, noted 'We are but human, and the whole truth about Rhitsona is more than most mortals can digest' *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 57 (1937) 92.

Percy defended himself by asserting that his approach was from the 'archaeological [rather] than from the artistic point of view.' In a letter to Gilbert Murray, Ronald Burrows wrote 'great pressure was put upon us to publish only show vases, and not to adopt the catalogue form ... Our faults, of which we are painfully conscious, lie not in recording too much, but in observing too little.' As Victoria



**Silver tetradrachm from Amphipolis,** 315–294 BC [2006.6.1], showing Hercules with a lion scalp headdress. Reverse shows Zeus enthroned. See the 'Egypt' case in the Museum.

Sabetai, of the Academy of Athens, has pointed out in her 2005 article 'Ronald M. Burrows and Percy N. Ure in Boeotia' (available on the Ure Museum website), what Percy and Ronald had effectively done was to explode the myth that highly artistic masterpieces were filling every grave.

On the contrary, most graves held cheap and mass-produced clay offerings, something that would surely have offended the late Victorian idealistic view of Greece. The Ures seemed to take such inconveniences with resigned acceptance. Annie's main complaints were the price of Chivers jam in Athens and the lack of fruit and vegetables. 'We eat yaorti twice a day. It is a sort of junket made of sheep's milk and they say it is the healthiest stuff that exists as well as being nourishing'. On arrival in Rhitsona they found their rented 'spitia' crammed full of sheep, straw and manure. 'Three quarters of it has a floor laid to earth and mangers round the walls ... Most of our furniture consisted of boxes which were made into cupboards or seats as required. But every evening they diminished in usefulness as we packed into them the finds of the day.'

Annie wrote to her sister, May, in March 1921, 'P & I live in a place that is a cross between a stable & a barn ... Thanks to a liberal use of Keatings & Izal we are not unduly annoyed by insects. The rats are not so easily disposed of & keep us awake at night ... It has a door that will shut but no windows, but it is well ventilated by holes in the walls & roof ... Our staple food is shark and sheep's milk.' In 1956 she recalled 'At nighttime the wind blew from Siberia all the way over the Black Sea, down the Dardanelles over the snows of Delphi ... and howled through the dry stone walls.' But 'it was wonderful to wake to the sound of sheep bells in the morning sunshine. For lunch we ate bread and cheese and rolls under the pine trees while little tortoises paraded around us.'

All quotes without attribution can be found in A. D. Ure's letters, diaries and audio tape held in the Ure Museum archives.





**The excavators, c. 1922.** Annie Ure is standing centre back holding a box. The seated female in front is Semni Karouzou, later to become the Curator of the National Museum in Athens. To Annie's left stand Yanni, the cook, and Johnny, the policeman. Johnny was mainly there to prevent tomb-robbers but he was very handy in keeping away the odd jackal or wolf. As can be seen, the dress code for excavating was more formal in the early twentieth century and, as nowadays, hats of one sort or another were a 'must.'



**The 'best room in the house.'** The packing cases, used as furniture, can be seen in the foreground.

There were no more Rhitsona digs after 1922, partly due to the Ures' growing family but also due to the political situation in Greece and Europe. The Ures published the final publication of the Rhitsona finds in 1934.

Percy remained at Reading University as Professor of Classics until his retirement in 1946. His publications include *The Origin of Tyranny* (1922) and *Justinian and his Age* (1951). Between them the Ures published three books based on their excavations at Rhitsona in Boeotia, over fifty articles on Greek pottery and a volume in the international series *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum* (1954).

**'On the rare occasions when I have seen him [Percy] moved to anger by some act of injustice he would assert his principles unflinchingly, driving himself to speak what he felt. I think of him as one of the saints of scholarship. He loved the scholar's life and incited others to it by its example. Above all he loved the Greeks, modern as well as ancient.'** (Dodds 1977)



**The 'Spitia' or living quarters.** Johnny stands ready with a loaded gun.

## Ure Museum of Greek Archeology

Among its more than 2000 objects, the Ure Museum houses perhaps the fourth largest collection of Greek ceramics in the UK. Its inception came in 1909 when Lady Flinders Petrie, widow of the eminent archaeologist and Egyptologist Sir William Flinders Petrie, donated a collection of Egyptian antiquities to Reading College as it was then known (Reading did not receive its University Charter until 1926). Similar gifts made over the years included a small collection of vases bought cheaply on the continent by Percy and some 'unconsidered trifles' from the British Museum. In 1961 Her Majesty the Queen kindly donated a Roman tombstone from Leptis Magna which can be seen in the entrance area of the Museum. Originally given to the Prince Regent in 1816 by the Bashaw of Tripoli, it remained in the courtyard of the British Museum until 1826, when it was moved to Virginia Water as part of the 'ruins' erected by Sir Jeffry Wyattville; then on to Windsor Forest in 1927. The centerpiece of the museum is a reconstruction of Rhitsona Grave 145. It was the last grave to be excavated by the Ures in 1922 and serves as a tribute to them and their dream to 'give life and variety to the study of Greek History.'



**Shaft grave 114a, Rhitsona.** Tiled box grave for infant. Photo courtesy of National Archaeological Museum of Thebes.





## Professor Percy Neville Ure

**i** For more information,  
please contact:

### Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology

Department of Classics,  
School of Humanities,  
University of Reading, Whiteknights,  
Reading, RG6 6AA

[ure@reading.ac.uk](mailto:ure@reading.ac.uk)

Tel +44 (0)118 378 6990

[www.reading.ac.uk/ure](http://www.reading.ac.uk/ure)

