



The Egypt Society of Bristol

NEWS UPDATE

Issue 25

January 2010

Chairman's Dig

As I write this, overlooking the snowy wastes of Redland, one rather pines for the warmth of Egypt – or for that matter other lands of the Near East. The Treasurer and I recently returned from Syria and Jordan, where a few days of grey skies were more than compensated for by rather more sunny – if a tad chilly – days. Syria in particular was a revelation, with magnificent sites such as Palmyra all but devoid of visitors, souvenir sellers who took *la shukran* ('no thank you') for an answer – and toilets of exemplary cleanliness! While Egypt retains its lure, its near-neighbours certainly deserve return visits!

We come now to another AGM marking another year in the history of the ESB, which has seen the sad loss of two of our members, and also of former Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum, Harry James. Long-time members will remember Harry as our very first lecturer, speaking on 28 January 1998 on 'Howard Carter: Artist to Excavator'.

This summer we will be running a coach trip to Kingston Lacy, a fine house in Dorset with also a very fine Egyptian collection that the ESB visited a decade ago. We have made special arrangements to get into the house before normal opening time to give us a chance to view the Egyptian gallery before the general public are admitted. The gardens also have an Egyptian stone coffin and an obelisk – the latter a key document in Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphs.



Tales from the Treasury

Yes, it's *that* time of year again when we ask you for money. If – as I hope – you want to renew your subscription, please fill in the enclosed form and return it to me. Of course if you already pay by Standing Order, you need to nothing. As always, if there are any queries, please get in touch.



Memo from the Museum

Egyptology Collection Online

We're in the final stages of testing an online version of the museum database. Soon, anyone across the world will be able to access Bristol's Egyptian collection, which encompasses both ancient and modern material.

There are 8,091 Egyptian objects registered on the database from the Foreign Archaeology Collection so far. In addition, there are 353 objects from Egypt in the British Archaeology Collection (because they were donated as part of the Fawcett Collection, which is mostly British archaeology – and – as requested by the donor – it is kept together); 38 in Geology; 20 in Ethnography; 7 in Biology; and 2 in Eastern Art.

There are also paintings, prints and drawings featuring Egypt, including David Roberts' *Temple of Dendera*, which is on display in the Art Gallery. There are still many more objects to add to the database.

Wall of Pots

As well as the Egypt gallery at the museum, you can now see five more Egyptian pots in the 'Wall of Pots' on the Ground Floor (by the new children's area). This display features pots from around the world.



New Acquisitions

We recently acquired a large Egyptian tapestry weave panel. It shows the River Nile with lotus flowers and papyrus plants, ducks, fish, frogs, birds and insects.

It was made in 2009 by Mahrous Abdou, from the Ramses Wissa Wassef Exhibition Trust near Cairo. Some of you may have seen it on display in the Nature in Art exhibition: see *Egyptian Landscapes: Tapestries from the Ramses Wissa*



Wassef Art Centre Egypt (Gloucester, 2009). and <http://www.wassa-wassef-arts.com/bristol.html>. The tapestry will be added to the museum's Egypt gallery.

Volunteers

This year we've had three Egyptology volunteers. Carl Walsh & Kerry Nickels added the samples from the Bristol Mummy Project to our database (there are 583 individual records ranging from the coffin, to bandaging, to beetles!). Dan Jarman is currently registering and photographing Egyptian ceramics.

Visitors & Researchers

We have received a wide range of interesting enquiries & researchers. Their projects have included Victorian curiosities, Greek & Coptic ostraca, Sarah Belzoni, scarabs, Nefermaat, Egyptian weaponry, papyrus, Egyptian mummies, and objects from Bubastis. Visitors have included a group from Swansea's Egypt Centre, ESB speakers, school groups, the BBC, and staff from various museums (including Cairo).

Banksy

Over the Summer the Banksy exhibition spread into the Egypt gallery with a "terracotta warrior at a discount price". Meanwhile, in the Art Gallery, a replica of Claude's 'Flight into Egypt' had an added advert, boasting easyJet's Cairo deals!

South Asasif

During the Summer I worked on the archaeological site of South Asasif, about which Elena Pischikova talked to the ESB last January.

The Theban necropolis of South Asasif was, until recently, assumed to have been completely destroyed. It was originally excavated in 1922 but it had fallen into a serious state of decay from local people living, cooking and keeping livestock in the tombs. Floods destroyed the walls and brought in debris. Surrounding villages quarried much of the remaining stonework and houses were built over the top of the necropolis. Since 2006, three tombs have been rediscovered though, hidden behind thick layers of debris. They date to the Twenty-fifth/sixth Dynasty (c. 722-525 BC) and belonged respectively to Karakhamun (Theban Tomb [TT] 223), Karabasken (TT 391) and Irtieru (TT 390).

Excavation this year focused on the tomb of Karakhamun. The other tombs have been worked on since 2006 and are now partly cleared and being treated by conservators. The tomb of Irtieru contains modern graffiti by the Abd el-Rassul family. They are notorious tomb robbers who have used the tombs for over a century. This graffiti is being preserved as it provides an extra layer of the tomb's history. The tomb of Karabasken was also used by local youths as a summer house. Again, this is an interesting part of the tomb's history, which ought to be preserved somehow.

The tombs of Karabasken and Irtieru were being used to store the painted wall and ceiling fragments from the tomb of Karakhamun. The conservators were fitting together any matches. Some progress has been made but it is a huge task. The work team consisted of a director, about 40 local workmen, six conservators, three inspectors from the Supreme Council of Antiquities, and a changing team of volunteers (six to eight people whilst we were there).

Volunteer tasks included finding painted fragments and, occasionally, artefacts amongst the rubble of the site; photography of excavations and individual objects; registering everything—including find spots, measurements, drawings, descriptions, and translations of any hieroglyphs; and then transferring all the information to a database. We worked a six-day week, 6am- 1pm. Most of my time was spent registering fragments in a tent next to the excavation pit.

As we were based so close to the Tombs of the Nobles, some of us also took the opportunity to visit nearby sites when time allowed. I was able to see the tombs of Sennefer (TT96), Rekhmire (TT100), Ramose (TT 55), Menna (TT69), Userhat (TT56), Nakht (TT52), Pabasa (TT279), Montuemhat (TT34), Puiemre (TT39), Kheruef (TT192), and Ankhor (TT404).

It was particularly interesting to visit Pabasa's tomb as I knew that we had a funerary cone from there on display in the Egypt Gallery (H5119). On my return to Bristol I also found that we have a shabti (H2335) inscribed with the name of

Userhat, although this could be from either TT51 or TT56; and a funerary cone (H2368) inscribed with the name of Montuemhat, so possibly originally from TT34.

We also visited the Valley of the Kings- including the tomb of Horemheb (KV57), which had only reopened a week before we were there. We have a small statue of him on display in the Egypt gallery (H5153), and a faience finger ring bearing his name (H4928) - also on display.

For further information on the South Asasif see www.southasasif.com

Amber Druce

Documentation Assistant, Ethnography and Foreign Archaeology

Lecture Reports

24 March 2009 *Egypt's Earliest Writing*

Dr Kathryn Piquette, *Trinity College, Dublin*

This evening's lecture by Dr Piquette dealt with the very early period of Egyptian history and the in-depth study she has made of bone and ivory plaques found in tombs.

What was the purpose of these plaques? Most have been found far away from settlements, in the low desert away from the flood plain of the Nile. Were they only made for use in tombs or are these the only ones to have survived? Also, they have only been found in seven sites including Abydos, Negada, Memphis and the Giza area and only found in cemetery sites. The earliest of which was found at Abydos. These plaques show examples of the earliest form of writing in Egypt.

Writing emerged in the early Dynastic periods dating from 3200 - 3100 BC, on bone and ivory labels. Was this actual writing or merely a picture of the contents of a jar or box? There are many different styles of labels; some show a simple picture of what was probably in a container, some show much more information in lines both vertical and horizontal. Did the materials and tools used in making the labels influence the style of writing and the amount of detail on a label? Some show writing on both sides, some only on a single side.

Although there is a hole punched in the plaques there has only been one found with any remains of string still attached. The hole is always punched in the same place. Dr Piquette speculated the plaques may only be magical representations of goods placed in the tomb which would become real in the afterlife and were not meant as labels at all.

There is also the question of who was communicating the information to whom. One label shows a smiting scene on one side and a picture of a pair of sandals on the other side. Why would anyone want to label a pair of sandals, unless the sandals were in a container and could not be seen.

It would be very easy to say the plaques were used to label the grave goods being placed in the tombs or even just magical representations, but

they could have been used as a tally list of the goods being placed in a tomb. All the plaques would be on one string, perhaps kept by the person in charge of stocking the tomb for the afterlife. Some of the labels found are very detailed and must have taken a lot of work if they were only going to be used as a check-list. Perhaps a lot of care was taken because the list was also placed in the tomb and had a magical purpose too.

Dr Piquette's study of these relatively small and insignificant items dealt with every possible aspect of the labels and the writing on the labels, but still raised many questions as to their purpose and meaning. These questions may be answered one day if further examples are found in their original setting.

19 May 2009 *Warriors, Priests and King's Men: Egyptian Biographies of the Middle Kingdom*

Dr Renata Landgráfová, Charles University, Prague/Freie Universität Berlin

What are the texts that we conventionally call 'biographies'? The texts were not written by the person the text was about, did not say clearly what had occurred. As with most Egyptian writings, it was more about what the person wished others to know about them, even if it was exaggerated. The texts usually follow the same order; a narrative telling of the daring deeds and great accomplishments of the person, an offering formula, afterlife wishes and sometimes even a threat.

On the stele of Antef, son of Senet there is the usual description of what Antef achieved during his life and the positions he held, but nothing about the person himself. The most important thing for others to know is that they were good men in their lifetime. There are no writings of this kind about women.

The usual format begins by confirming the person's right to build the tomb. The King granted this right, therefore a statement is included saying "... which the King gives". The dead person addresses the living person reading the inscription "Oh living ones who are on earth, who shall pass by this tomb". One individual was only interested in addressing higher placed, wealthier passers by asking that an offering be made or said on his behalf.

The deceased person's wishes for the afterlife are then added, "May he travel through the sky, may welcome be said to him by the great God of Abydos".

There follows a tomb consecration formula asking that nothing be destroyed and that the tomb was build legally, proving the deceased person's right to the tomb.

Threats are rare, but some examples are quite graphic "their bodies will be burnt with the damned". One is quite specific saying "I will wring his neck like a bird".

It is not easy to glean much historical fact from these writings as the deceased person is more concerned with listing their titles and great deeds, although events and the feeling of the time can be identified. During the troubles leading to the unification of Egypt the local Governors kept order in their area and they listed their achievements, whereas this used to be the King's role.

An army commander tells how he was the overseer of foreign mercenaries and explains how he fought for and extended the borders.

Djemi, a military commander from Gabalein speaks of power over Nubia "I was an overseer of troops in this town". He goes on to say that he acted according to his town's wishes and not those of the King.

There are texts written by men searching out new mining areas. These explorations would have had military support because of the hostile peoples they encountered on their journey.

Priests speak of hiring priests and their payment. More importantly, they describe the restoration of shrines in Abydos and Thebes – "Its memory existed no more, then I rebuilt it". Temples were neglected during the troubled times of the unification and needed restoration, some people telling of how they journeyed to obtain stones for building.

Royal officials have a lot to say about what they did for their King. Tjetju, the Overseer of the Treasury says. "I was his servant of his body, truly his Chamberlain. The treasury was in my hand and under my seal".

Graffiti can describe times of great problems, of fighting, famine and fear of the Royal palace. "I saved my city from pillage and the terrible horror of the palace".

The lecture this evening provided an insight into texts which have not been fully published showing that, in amongst all the titles and achievements real information about unification battles, tales of expeditions for raw materials and renewal of trade routes can also be found. Sifting through all the hyperbole can often produce nuggets of detail that build a real picture of Egypt and what was taking place at that time.

13 October 2009 *Crocodile Mundi: Egyptian Water Spells*

Joanna Kyffin, University of Liverpool

The Nile crocodile is a powerful predator, known to grow to a length of 20ft. It's not surprising the people living and working near the Nile in ancient times liked to have spells handy to keep these creatures at bay.

Although no longer seen in the more populated areas of the Nile because of the Aswan dam, crocodiles were common in ancient times and appear in many tomb paintings and statues. They were feared, but also venerated as a God, Sobek. Crocodiles were used in magic and were magical

objects. Kom Ombo was the centre of the ancient crocodile cult and mummies of crocodiles and even crocodile eggs have been found.

The threat of a crocodile was used as a curse – "the crocodile will come to get you!" but were also agents of justice and power. The hieroglyph showing the crocodile means ruler.

Spells were also used in connection with water as this was such an important commodity for the ancient peoples. Their lives revolved around the possibility of not enough, or sometimes, too much water.

How was this magic used, particularly by everyday people? Spells were written in a highly sophisticated form of the language that only the most educated people would be able to read. It is unlikely the ordinary person actually cast spells.

Written instructions have been found in the Harris Papyrus about keeping the information secret, "do not reveal it to others, a true secret of the House of Life". We can therefore assume knowledge of spells was only available to a very select group who would use the power correctly, probably priests. It is likely ordinary people had access to magic and spells by owning magical objects which they obtained from the priests. Perhaps these spells and amulets were available for a small donation to the local temple.

One of the spells against the crocodile was an egg of clay used by fishermen to throw into the water on encountering a crocodile. It was not necessary to say the spell when throwing the egg into the water as the spell had already been spoken by the priest, therefore making it a magical object and capable of making the spell work.

Several spells involved swallowing water or licking off written words. Spells written on stele were brought to life by pouring water over the stele and then drinking the water, therefore protecting the drinker. A particular example of this was a spell as protection against being bitten by a scorpion. Another example is a cup bearing magical inscriptions on the side. The person drinking from the cup would always be protected.

So, the next time you see a crocodile member these words, "Get back, Maga son of Seth. You shall not disturb the water with your tail. You shall not seize with your arms. You shall not open your mouth".



© The Egypt Society of Bristol
c/o Department of Archaeology & Anthropology,
University of Bristol
43 Woodland Road, BRISTOL BS8 1UU
www.EgyptSocietyBristol.org.uk