



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP

Newsletter 110

October/November 2017

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

- 1st October Ancient Egyptian Furniture: from the earliest to those “wonderful things” of the New Kingdom: Dr Geoffrey Killen
- 5th November Hedgehog boats: Dr Penny Wilson
- 3rd December Papyrus Berlin, a Middle Kingdom mortuary ritual reflected in writing: Ilona Regulsky
- 7th January 2018 Lunch at Crofters
- 4th February Saite Tombs at Saqqara: Dr Ramadan Hussein

Our speaker in October, Dr Geoffrey Killen, is a leading ancient furniture historian, technologist and Egyptologist who studied Design and Technology at Shoreditch College, University of London and the University of Liverpool, where he specialised in Ramesside woodworking. He has studied the collections of Egyptian furniture at most of the major museums including the Egyptian Antiquities Museum, Cairo, and is the author of several major books and numerous papers. He has also led in the field of experimental archaeology where making and using replica woodworking tools and equipment has generated and tested archaeological hypotheses. His practical work is now displayed together with those original artefacts in several British museums.

January Lunch

Alison Woollard will be organising our annual lunch at Crofter's Wine Bar and Restaurant in Witham, on Sunday 7th January 2018. She will be taking deposits of £5 per person in October and November.

August Book Auction

The August book auction raised £237.53 which has been sent to Dr Penny Wilson, the Director of the Egypt Exploration Society's excavation at Sais.

"Asyut: The Capital That Never Was" Jochem Kahl (Sackler Lecture 2017)

This year's Raymond and Beverly Sackler Distinguished Lecture in Egyptology (http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/departments/ancient_egypt_and_sudan/annual_lecture_and_colloquium.aspx) was given by Jochem Kahl on the subject of the city of Asyut. He started by setting the scene with a thematically appropriate quote from Amelia Edwards, who

visited the city in 1843. She described how as she approached, it looked like a fairytale city on the Nile, but on arrival she was much less impressed with the prosaic reality of the modern city.

Asyut was the capital of the 13th Nome in Pharaonic Egypt - it's in the middle of the country, about 400km south of Cairo, 100km south of Amarna and 300km north of Luxor. The modern city has around 400,000 inhabitants, and completely covers old Asyut. Due to the silt deposited by the Nile flooding the depth of any remains is significant - late antiquity is on the order of 5m below the modern surface and the New Kingdom is 8m deep. Even the ancient cemetery is beginning to be covered up by the modern one. So Kahl said that to investigate ancient Asyut one primarily needs to use what records there are of older excavations, and tangential evidence from texts. The older excavations, as is so often the case, were not well documented but did uncover many fine artefacts which are now housed in museums such as the Louvre, the Turin Museum and the Met.

However there is still some modern archaeology taking place. Since 2003 there has been an ongoing project to "retrace" the old city and as part of that a large workforce every year undertakes excavations and documents what can still be seen. Much of the modern archaeology focuses on Gebel Asyut el-Gharbi, a mountain on the western outskirts of the city. The first signs of human activity on this mountain are from around 4000 BCE, and it has been continuously used since at least 3000 BCE. Of course this archaeology is not all neatly preserved in situ, the site has been extensively quarried over the last couple of hundred years and previous archaeological expeditions have used explosives to "excavate" tombs. Kahl showed us the difference in one tomb between a drawing from 1799 and modern photos from 2005 - all the front of the tomb is now gone, leaving only an inner hall. But there are still objects that can tell us what was there; the things that older expeditions found less interesting.

Having set the scene, and discussed how we know what we know, Kahl then moved on to the meat of his talk. In his view Asyut has three different natures: it is a wounded city, it is a border city and it is a city of culture; and he considered each of these in turn.

Asyut is a wounded city, a city of war and terror. An example is the 21st Century BCE civil war between Heracleopolis and Thebes that ended the 1st Intermediate Period. The tombs of the nomarchs from this period (designated tomb III and tomb IV) have inscriptions full of words of violence and war. The imagery on the walls is also full of violence, images of killing and images of the tomb owner with his soldiers. The war for Asyut lasted for 20 years, and while the city recovered well in the long term there's evidence that warfare remained important in the region for several generations after the end of the First Intermediate Period. This wasn't a unique example either, the cycle of war and recovery happened multiple times in Asyut's long history.

Asyut is a border city, which at first sounds paradoxical as it's located in the middle of Egypt. But it's nonetheless at a natural border and was called Guardian City in Ancient Egyptian. It's not only near a difficult place to navigate on the Nile, but also on an important trade route dating back to the Old Kingdom leading to the south through the desert. The mostly likely entry to the ancient desert road was located near Asyut. This has its good sides, as Kahl explained later in the talk, but it also means that it is near an entry point for invaders from the desert, so it is a double edged sword. This means that since at least the New Kingdom period through to the modern day there has been a strong military presence in Asyut.

Asyut is a city of culture, where trade routes and people meet and exchange both goods and ideas. As well as the previously mentioned southern trade route (and of course the connection to the Nile and internal trade) there have been items from the Mediterranean found in Asyut so there were also connections to the north. The geopolitical situation didn't just bring suffering, it also led to Asyut developing its own influential intellectual culture. To illustrate this Kahl discussed at length the tomb of a mayor of Asyut from the 20th Century BCE called Djefai-Hapi (the tomb is designated Tomb I). Djefai-Hapi was not only mayor but also the overseer of priests for two temples, and was presumably well educated in theology. As well as himself his tomb also mentions two wives, his mother and his sons. He was venerated as a local god in the late Middle Kingdom and into the early New Kingdom (and this reminded me of the Sackler

Lecture that Janet Richards gave two years ago where she discussed saint cults in Ancient Egypt (which I wrote up:

<http://ninecats.org/margaret/blog/2016/02/10/gate-ancestors-saint-cults-and-politics-past-abydos-janet-richards-sackler-lecture>)).

It's the largest non-royal rock tomb of his time, and used natural cavities in the rock as part of its construction. It had a layout reminiscent of an Old Kingdom pyramid. For instance there was a pond at the edge of the cultivation, with a causeway that led from this pond to the tomb. Inside the mountain (much of which is now gone if you compare it to drawings from 1799) there were several halls plus an extensive substructure. And it was monumental in scale - the halls were 11m tall, even the corridors were 10m tall.

The Great Transverse Hall still has much of its decoration. This has now been cleaned up and restored in parts so the true colours can be seen. The ceilings are decorated with blue and yellow geometric patterns and the east wall includes an idealised biography of Djefai-Hapi. There is a shrine at the back of the tomb, with offering scenes on the walls and a statue of Djefai-Hapi (sadly now damaged). And underneath there is a substructure that extends down at least 22m below the tomb halls, which is as far as the base of the mountain! Kahl said their excavations haven't yet reached a burial chamber and there are still deeper passages to investigate. However they have found a rather more modern looking ladder at the 22m level, which means that the burial chamber has probably been robbed at some point between 1799 and now, which is a shame.

So this tomb demonstrates the sophistication of the culture of Asyut of the time, and Kahl went on to explain how it also demonstrates the influence that this culture had on Egyptian culture in general. The decoration from this tomb is copied and turns up in later funerary contexts. One example is that the ceiling patterns from the Great Transverse Hall are re-used in the later Theban tombs of New Kingdom nobles. And some of these patterns even make their way into the modern world via 19th Century CE books of ornament. Texts are also copied, in particular the contracts for the cult of the dead which are part of the east wall inscriptions in the Great Transverse Hall. One example is found in the tomb of Senenmut in the early New Kingdom, and other examples are found even as late as the Roman period.

Djefai-Hapi's tomb is one of the most concrete examples that survives to demonstrate the influence of Asyut culture on Egyptian as a whole. There is also more tangential evidence that the city was once a repository of knowledge for Ancient Egyptian culture, but the physical evidence for this would be in the temples which are now several metres below the modern buildings. For instance the main temple was dedicated to Wepwawet and there is some evidence in the form of chance finds. Parts of the walls were found in the 1930s by illicit digging in a local's cellar (looking for gold), and the blocks that were dug up were sent to Cairo where they vanished for decades. They have now been found again (in 2014) and so can be investigated for anything they can tell us about the temple.

To conclude Kahl returned to the question implied in his title and the imagery of the Amelia Edwards quote he opened with. Why, given the military and cultural significance of Asyut, was it never the capital of Egypt? And his answer is that the very things that made it important - the proximity to the desert and to trade, the central location - are the same things that made it vulnerable and too far from international politics. The idea of Asyut as capital is a fantastic mirage that vanishes into implausibility when you look at it closely.

Margaret Patterson

Gilded Cartonage Mask of Titos Flavios Demetrios



This Roman-period mummy mask belonged to a man called Titos Flavios Demetrios. Apparently, this is the only known example inscribed with the name of a Roman citizen, as signified by his three names which are written in Greek around the back of the head. Made from layers of linen or papyrus and plaster, then painted and gilded, the mask is decorated all over with Egyptian symbols, deities and funerary scenes. It's interesting that he chose traditional Egyptian themes rather than the realistic "mummy portraits" that are better known from other

burials in Hawara in this period.

You may have seen this in the temporary exhibition "Beyond Beauty" at Two Temple Place a few years ago, but it is on permanent display in the Ipswich Museum's ancient Egypt gallery.

(Ipswich Museum IPSMG R. 1992-89.2)

John Patterson

Teaser

The hieroglyphs in the last newsletter came from the Tales of Wonder (Papyrus Westcar), lines 3.12 and 3.13: "Then the caretaker threw the crocodile of wax after him into the water and it became a crocodile of 7 cubits."

Thanks go to Margaret Patterson and John Patterson

The Essex Egyptology Group Committee

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