



# ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

## **August 2018 Meeting**

by Margaret Patterson

### **"Flies, Lions and Oyster Shells: Military Awards or Tea for Two" Taneash Sidpura**

In August Taneash Sidpura came to talk to us about the topic of his PhD research - golden flies, golden lions and oyster shells. These pendants are often stated to be military awards handed out by Pharaoh to people who distinguished themselves in battle, but having researched these items Sidpura disagrees with that assessment.

He began his talk by giving us some background to the items and their assumed meaning. It's typical of nobles to record self-praise on stelae and in their tomb inscriptions. Generally this is related to the king, and how wonderfully the noble did the things the king wanted him to do. Sidpura showed us some examples of these sorts of texts including the 12th Dynasty stela of Sobek-khu. These texts also record the gifts and rewards that the king has given them for doing these things.

Lots of these gifts are golden objects - including gold jewellery, golden flies and golden lions. The specific texts which record gifts of golden flies and lions are detailing the accomplishments of military men, and so these objects have been interpreted as being like modern medals. The conventional wisdom is that they were a bit like chivalric orders - Order of the Golden Fly or Order of the Golden Lion. The objects have also been assigned meanings by archaeologists - flies mean persistence, lions mean bravery and weapons indicate military prowess. Which makes a neat and tidy story, and is reflected in many museum labels etc, but Sidpura pointed out that when you start to examine it at all closely it begins to unravel. One key problem is that these same objects - golden flies, golden lions - are also found in the burials of women and children who would be unlikely to have medals for valour in battle. And it's clear if you look at a wider context that weapons as grave goods actually signify power and authority rather than strictly military prowess.

Sidpura next went through each of the three object types from his title in turn, before returning to consider what golden flies actually mean. Golden lions have been re-investigated more recently than the other two, so Sidpura has not himself looked at these objects in detail. He showed us some examples of the sort of things that he was talking about - small lions on rectangular bases about 2-3cm long. There are 50 known examples from the 12th and 13th Dynasty, none of which were found in the burials of men (of those

where the context is known). In contrast 22 were found in the burials of women. The researchers who re-investigated the meanings of golden lions looked at references to lions in texts and images, and found that they consistently represented the king. It makes sense, therefore, that they are found in the burials of royal women as signifiers of their relationship to the king. The texts that mention them as gifts to nobles also make sense in this context - they indicate the close relationship between the king and the man who served him well.



A string of 7 fly amulets from the 17th Dynasty, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
Photo from the Met, via Wikimedia Commons

There are 500 examples of golden flies, most of which are cut out of a flat sheet of gold in a shape roughly resembling a capital A. Some are just the flat shape, and others have a golden body attached to the flat sheet. One of the examples he talked about were rather unusual - they were from the grave goods of Ahhotep (an 18th Dynasty queen) at Dra Abu el Naga. Normally golden flies are about 1cm in size, but these are 9cm long. She's described in a text almost like she was a king, so between this and the golden fly necklace she was once thought to be a warrior queen. However if you look more closely at the text it is talking about her ability to rule and not her military prowess, and it's also not clear that it's intended to be literal. Not all of Ahhotep's grave goods were found - her tomb wasn't actually found, but her coffin and some grave goods were found buried in a pit which was presumably a robbers' cache. Those grave goods which were found back up the idea that she was a powerful woman, not necessarily a fighting woman.

Fly ornaments are not always made of gold. There is a long history from the Naqada II period through to the Roman period of flies made out of materials such as faience or hard stones. Sidpura showed us several examples of these. Some of them were like scarab

amulets in that they had texts inscribed on the bottom. They were often strung with other amulets - generally protective amulets such as Bes figures. Another example was of flies strung with ancestor bust beads.

The context they were found in is known for about 125 of the 500 golden flies. Of these 63% were found associated with women, 3% with men, 3% with children and 31% unknown. As Sidpura pointed out this doesn't fit with the military award hypothesis! There were also many designs of the flies, so they were not a distinctive award. And they were not unique in form, being based on non-golden flies. Whilst 2 of the 3 known examples of images of Egyptian men wearing flies are military men, there are also many images of Nubians wearing flies. These Nubians are often shown as captives, or being smited - and again this doesn't fit well with the military award hypothesis.

There are only 2 texts which refer to golden flies (both referencing them as gifts from Pharaoh), all the other texts refer to the real insects. The references to the real insects are interesting - fly dung or fly blood is an ingredient in medicine or magic. And when Sidpura said this my first thought was "fly dung? how do you get that?" and that is what he went on to explain. The bee was a symbol of the king, and so beekeepers couldn't refer to themselves as beekeepers because it would be presumptuous. Instead they called themselves fly keepers. Thus fly dung is honey! And what is interesting about this in the context of golden flies as gifts is that it may put the golden flies into the same category as the golden lions - are they symbols of the king? Another association for flies (the real insects) is that in the Coffin Texts they are linked to regeneration and rebirth. So in texts flies are a metaphor for bees (and thus the king) and for regeneration.

Sidpura now moved on to discuss oyster shells. He started by showing us a picture of an example of the objects he was talking about - this was a 10cm shell, likely to be from a pearl bearing species. It was engraved with the cartouche of Senwosret. There are 60 known examples of these shells, and all are very alike, even down to the handwriting being similar. On the various shells there are two different cartouches, and so it's possible to work out that it's Senwosret I. So this particular variant is a short-lived practice, although there are other examples that don't match these ones. The shells were mostly purchased and so their contexts are not secure. One of these purchases was by the Egyptologist Herbert Winlock in about 1922 - he bought a mummified arm which came with one of these shells and a piece of leatherwork with military significance. Some more shells came from tomb MMA507 at Deir el Bahri. This was a mass grave of warriors from the Middle Kingdom, and so this is also a military context. Thus the shells were assumed to be military awards, but once again a closer examination throws this into doubt.

Of those where there is a context of some sort four had no military connection, and four had some military connections but mostly of a tenuous nature. And again the inscribed oyster shells are not unique - they are a sub-type of a more general class of oyster shell ornaments. And these uninscribed oyster shells are often associated with women - either being found with them, or being drawn onto female figurines. The significance of the inscribed oyster shells is more likely to do with having the king's name on them - again as with the lions, and perhaps the flies, it is a symbol that links the recipient to the king.

Sidpura finished his talk by returning to the golden flies and summarising his conclusions about their significance. Firstly, there is no evidence that they symbolise persistence. It is

also notable that they are not gifted alone, but are always gifted with other golden objects. Sidpura sees their significance to the recipient as being the gold that they were made from, not the form that the gold was in. In the opposite fashion to modern gifts and awards the content was less important than the material. The objects emphasise the relationship between the king and the recipient - that the king values the recipient enough to give precious gifts to them.

This talk was an interesting reminder that even things that "everyone knows" are worth properly re-examining every now and then. And that the assessments by previous archaeologists may tell us more about their own culture and assumptions than about Egyptian culture!