



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

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by Alison Woollard

Exploring Egypt through woodcraft
Gersande Eschenbrenner-Dieme

Gersande began by debunking the myth that there aren't many wooden objects from Ancient Egypt because there's not much wood in Egypt. As she pointed out, museums are full of wood from Ancient Egypt: coffins, models, furniture, sculpture, boxes and utensils.

Very little of this wood has been studied in great detail so Gersande hopes her TRACER project, ("Tree Roots: an analytical 'culture' of economy and religion – case-study Egypt 2050-1550 BC"), based at the Institute of Archaeology at UCL, will lay the foundation of a global project dedicated to wood in Ancient Egypt. She was particularly pleased to announce that a New Kingdom wood workshop has been discovered recently on Elephantine Island which will provide a lot of material for the project.

Through close study of the different woods used for objects, the large range of different styles and the methods of manufacture, it is possible to build a detailed picture of the way wood was imported into Egypt, how the products of different workshops were transported across Egypt and how the variations of style and manufacture reflect changes in Ancient Egyptian society, government, economics and religion during the Middle Bronze Age.

The close study of wooden objects can identify which workshop they came from and even whether they came from the hands of an isolated workman or from a master craftsman or student. Stylistic details can trace how workmen moved around Egypt and how networks of workmen developed and changed.

Having very little biological knowledge of trees, Gersande went to Kew to be trained in wood sampling. She described the varieties of wood which are found in objects. There are three main native woods: Acacia Nilotica (gum Arabic tree), tamarisk and ficus sycomorus (sycamore fig or fig mulberry) which is not to be confused with the sycamore of Europe. Imported woods came from cercis siliquastrum (the Judas tree), cedar, pine, different varieties of ebony. Egyptian pharaohs liked to show on monuments the range of woods which they could import as proof of their power. Gersande has studied the links between the names of different woods as they are used in ancient texts and the physical evidence from objects as a way of determining if the texts are accurate.

The varying qualities of the woods meant they were used for different purposes. The small branches of acacia were used for small objects whereas the branches of ficus sycomorus are larger and could therefore be used for building or for coffins. Ficus sycomorus was highly regarded because of its connections with Hathor. Gersande showed us a model of a garden made for a tomb. The model garden was filled with miniature ficus sycomorus trees made out of the wood itself. Clearly relaxing in your garden under these trees was a much prized feature of the afterlife. Harder woods such as ebony were used for decorative features on objects made of other wood.

Gersande then outlined the three aims of the TRACER project:

- How can Egyptian carpentry reveal societal changes and match political, economic and religious development in the period 2050-1550 BCE?
- How the production of carpentry and the networking between producers can be used to better understand a period of transition marked by the collapse of royal power and marked by the modification of historical societal rules?
- How carpentry can provide information about daily life and establish links between the land of the living and the land of the dead

She explored some examples such as the village of Lahun which yielded a lot of objects for everyday life and for funerary use. It is possible to map how objects have been moved around and to explore why some particular workshops only produced one kind of object. She also described coffins from Asyut which are in the British Museum. In these, red pigment has been applied to the upper rim of the coffins made from local wood and also to the concealed edges of adjoining planks. Since red pigment is used in texts asking the gods to protect the body inside the coffin there is a possibility that the use of red pigment on the coffin itself was designed to provide similar protection. Those parts of the coffin made of imported cedar wood did not have this red pigment applied.

Collections of wood fragments in the Petrie museum have also been studied. The matching of some fragments has been possible as well as the identification of some mysterious objects. For example, an object which looks like a comb with large rounded teeth and a hole in it looks very similar to rakes which are used today for moving coffee beans around so that they dry evenly. The hole is for the handle of the rake. It is highly likely that these objects were used for raking crops while they dried.

Lastly Gersande showed pictures of coffins from Qubbet el Hawa at Aswan where a close examination of the painted texts on coffins showed how much care had been taken to place hieroglyphs accurately and to correct their position where necessary. The presentation showed how much information and understanding can be gleaned from this detailed examination of wood and carpentry techniques.

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