



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP

Newsletter 122

October/November 2019

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

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| 6 th October | Graffiti at el Kab – Dr Luigi Prada |
| 12 th October | Autumn Study Day “Mummification in the ancient Egyptian World” – Prof Joann Fletcher and Dr Stephen Buckley (advance tickets only) |
| 3 rd November | Scarab and seal amulet workshops in ancient Egypt – Stephanie Boonstra |
| 1 st December | Perceptions of Seth – Dr Ian Taylor |
| 12 th January 2020 | New Year Lunch – see below |
| 1 st February | Half-day Workshop with Dora Goldsmith (advance tickets only) |
| 2 nd February | The Olfactory Landscape of Love Making in ancient Egypt – Dora Goldsmith |

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Our October speaker, Dr Luigi Prada from Oxford, will be speaking about “Travellers and Pilgrims under the Last Pharaohs, recent investigations by the Oxford Expedition to El Kab”

In November, Stephanie Boonstra from the Egypt Exploration Society will be talking about seals and amulets. Egypt’s history has often been written using grand narratives, royal monuments, and objects of the elite. However, small and unassuming artefacts, such as scarab amulets, can be used to illuminate and mirror the known and unknown periods of Egyptian history. By using the minute details of the miniature amulets, trade routes, workshops, and cultural influences can be reconstructed and used to create another dimension to the history of ancient Egypt. Evidence from scarab and seal amulet workshops from the Second Intermediate Period and early Eighteenth Dynasty will be analysed.

EEG AUTUMN STUDY DAY – MUMMIFICATION IN THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN WORLD – 12TH OCTOBER 2019

This study day will examine the various forms of mummification practiced throughout the ancient Egyptian world. Focussing on their own research over the last 30 years, Prof Joann Fletcher and Dr Stephen Buckley will discuss the true beginnings of mummification and the techniques and materials employed.

Further information: info@essexegyptology.co.uk

Last few tickets now on sale: £30 members and £35 non-members.

NEW YEAR LUNCH – SUNDAY 12TH JANUARY 2020

A New Year lunch will be organised for members and guests on Sunday 12th January 2020 at Crofter's Restaurant in Witham. Bookings and deposits (£5 per person) will be taken from today's meeting by Rosemary Ackland/Janet Brewer.

Chairman's Corner: Egyptology in fiction

Having recently failed to finish watching the execrable Exodus: Gods and Kings I've been thinking about Egyptology in fiction and entertainment; when it works and when it falls flat on its face. I've always enjoyed a bit of fictional Egyptology, but like most Egyptologists and enthusiasts I'm painfully aware that it is mostly badly or lazily done. If we examine successful attempts to integrate Egyptology into modern fictional worlds, we find an interesting pattern; to be successful in fiction you must take the Egyptian elements very seriously. The sloppy addition of Egyptian ideas or motifs almost always ends in failure. This pattern holds true across the various media in which fictional Egyptology occurs, whether books, film, TV or computer games.

Using an ancient Egyptian background

This is one of the most common methods of integrating Egyptology into fiction. Ancient Egypt or Egyptology form the background to your story, but do not inspire the plot. To be successful this type of Egyptological fiction requires a dedication to detail and accuracy that takes the Egyptian background at face value. The famously accurate ancient Egyptian world in the computer game Assassins Creed: Origins is a good example. In literature, the remarkably accurate portrayal of Hatshepsut's Egypt in Lauren Haney's detective stories is a good example. Her genre is detective fiction, but her detective is the Medjay Bak, who solves crimes in the New Kingdom fortress of Buhen. Getting the background details right is always important, but accuracy is paramount when all the Egyptian flavour in your fiction comes from the background, while your plot and characters are of different derivation.

Recreating an ancient myth or legend

This is a very literal approach to Egyptological fiction, where you simply re-work an ancient myth, legend or Biblical story. The rule here is very clear; you must take the original story both seriously and literally. If you are retelling an ancient story you can probably get away with inaccuracies in your setting and background but messing up the plot is almost guaranteed to torpedo it. Exodus: Gods and Kings doesn't work because it wants to make film about the Exodus, and it also wants to propose a 'rational' explanation for the plagues of Egypt. But the confrontation between Pharaoh (a living god) and Moses (representative of one who claims to be the only God) is the heart of the Exodus story and one that would have been entirely intelligible to ancient audience. Make the plagues natural occurrences and you suck the dramatic tension from that confrontation. The Ten Commandments and Gods of Egypt are very

different films, but they are watchable because they take their underlying stories literally. The gods in those stories are presented as truly powerful. The wonders that occur aren't reduced to freaks of nature and the dramatic tension is preserved. Myths and legends have been honed by the passage of time into plots that are intrinsically appealing to human beings; writers abandon those plots at their peril.

Imparting an ancient Egyptian flavour across the board

This is a halfway house between using Egypt and Egyptology as your setting and retelling an ancient story. Typically, both the setting and the plot include ancient Egyptian or Egyptological aspects, but both setting and plot also make use of other tropes. Elizabeth Peters is the master of this combination; producing books that are both Egyptological in feel and plot points, but also clearly owe a considerable debt to tropes from what Amelia Peabody would term 'sensational fiction' (Gothic horror, Victorian thrillers, detective novels etc). The accuracy of the archaeological and Egyptological detail plays an important role in making the more outlandish elements believable. Taking both setting and Egyptological plot points seriously does not prevent the author from having fun with her subject, but the suspension of disbelief in the reader is maintained because her jokes do not break the fourth wall. Her characters always take everything archaeological very seriously, even when both reader and author are sharing a joke at the characters' lack of awareness.

Attention to precise Egyptological detail and a plot that takes its archaeology seriously goes a long way, even if the premise of your film is as guaranteed to annoy an Egyptologist as 'Aliens literally did build the pyramids'! Thus did Stargate win me over with in-jokes about the inaccuracy of Wallis Budge's books on Hieroglyphs and the absence of vowels from written Egyptian. Showing you have done some Egyptological research (or listened to the Egyptologist you hired as consultant) by integrating genuine Egyptological ideas and concepts into **your** plot instead of using a standard McGuffin (or similar film-writing trope) is always positive, no matter how outlandish your premise.

Serious fun

Fiction is supposed to be enjoyable. Fictional Egyptology must be fun and it's perfectly reasonable for it to take liberties with reality. That is after all the very definition of fiction. If you wanted an education in Egyptology, you'd read a scholarly book. Paradoxically creating a believable Egyptian fiction requires that you take your Egyptology seriously, but not so seriously you cannot combine it with other elements and have some fun along the way.

Hannah Pethen

STUDY DAY – SATURDAY 26TH OCTOBER – 10am-5.30pm

The Cruciform Building, Gower Street, London WC1

“Everywhere the glint of gold”, understanding objects in Tutankhamun's tomb

The Friends of the Petrie Museum are organising the above study day with Lise Manniche and Olaf Kaper.

Information: friendsofpetrie.org.uk

Tickets: £35/£45

The Essex Egyptology Group Committee

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The Newsletter Editor, Janet Brewer, welcomes all articles, letters, reviews and quizzes.

All articles express the views and opinions of their authors

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