

## **Essex Egyptology Group – meeting report March 2025**

### **The Giraffe and its Place in Symbolic Vocabulary in the Kingdom of Kush with Dr Loretta Kilroe**

At the beginning of March, we were pleased to welcome a new speaker to Spring Lodge: Dr Loretta Kilroe whose topic was: The Giraffe and its Place in Symbolic Vocabulary in the Kingdom of Kush. Dr Kilroe is Project Curator: Sudan and Nubia at the British Museum. She introduced her talk with a reminder of the civil war currently taking place in Sudan and the suffering of the civilian population.

Dr Kilroe began by pointing out that while there are many representations of giraffes in archaeological remains in Sudan there are very few in Egypt. In prehistoric times giraffes would have been common in both countries but climate change led to a reduction in Egypt.

She outlined the shared history of Egypt and Kush pointing out the ways in which the two cultures traded, dominated each other at different periods and absorbed and blended imagery from each other. Indigenous styles of pottery in the kingdom of Kush, in what is now Sudan, re-merge after Egyptian domination fades away which suggests that they had continued to be used by the indigenous people.

We then looked at two groups of pots: those made by hand and those made on a wheel. Dr Kilroe outlined the differences between them. The handmade pots are decorated with outlines of the animals, which have been incised or impressed on the clay and which stand inside geometrical patterns and friezes. These pots are often of a practical nature. The pots which were made on a wheel have painted giraffes which are generally more detailed and anatomically correct.

Giraffes are found in many other settings in Kush: in rock art, as ivory inlays used in the decoration of furniture or combs. In Egypt they are often represented as being exotic imports from south of the country without any special symbolism.

What did the giraffe mean to the people of Kush? There is a possible solar link as animals which are sometimes represented alongside giraffes, such as snakes, also have a solar link. As giraffes are so often represented on pots in Kush, they may also have a connection with tattoos and body decoration, particularly on women. Pots are often compared to bodies and the patterns which are used for decoration often have a connection to fertility. It may be

that the patterns which are used on pots have a similar significance which was recognised in the oral culture which was handed down from generation to generation of which we now have no evidence. The study of these pots is particularly important because it comes from the indigenous culture rather than the elite.

Loretta concluded by pointing out the website of **The Sudan Archaeological Research Society** which contains much more information about research in the area: [www.sudarchrs.org.uk](http://www.sudarchrs.org.uk)

A few days after the talk the British Museum's Supporter news arrived in the post with the bronze figurehead of a goddess from Sudan on the front cover. Inside was a piece by Loretta about the travelling exhibition, '**Ancient Sudan: Enduring Heritage**' which is visiting Portsmouth and Stirling this year. The exhibition combines items from the Kingdom of Kush with displays created by local community groups from the Sudanese diaspora of artworks and oral histories that emphasise the diversity of Sudanese heritage.

Alison Woollard