

Second Annual Birmingham Egyptology Symposium: 'Nationality, Authority and Individuality in Ancient Egypt'. University of Birmingham, Friday 20th February 2015

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Following the success of the First Annual Birmingham Egyptology Symposium in 2014¹ the Second Annual Birmingham Egyptology Symposium was held at the University of Birmingham on 20th February 2015. This year's symposium was dedicated to issues of nationality, authority and individuality in ancient Egypt and was organised by Birmingham Egyptology thanks to the financial support of the Postgraduate Research Development Fund (University of Birmingham).² In this report I summarize some of the highlights of the day.

Aims of the symposium

Birmingham Egyptology invites academics and Egyptology enthusiasts to get together in annual symposia and follow current and original research in the field of Egyptology. Birmingham Egyptology Symposia also aim at giving early career researchers the opportunity to present and discuss their work. The Second Annual Birmingham Egyptology Symposium welcomed attendees and speakers from the United Kingdom and abroad. A wide number of topics were presented, ranging from architecture and burial customs to specific archaeological finds such as pottery, statues and amulets.

Opening talk

What can foreign pottery from Egyptian contexts tell researchers about Egyptian interactions with other cultures? In her opening lecture, Carla Gallorini (University of Birmingham) talked about the significance of examining foreign pottery in Egypt as a way of understanding the relationship between ceramics and the people who used them. Gallorini placed emphasis on material dating to the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period; specifically, pottery from the Pan Grave cemeteries unearthed by the Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project (AKAP) and the settlement

1 The First Annual Birmingham Egyptology Symposium focused on ritual landscapes in ancient Egypt. For the proceedings see Gregory, S.R.W. (ed.) 2014 'Proceedings of the First Birmingham Egyptology Symposium, University of Birmingham, 21st February 2014'. *Birmingham Egyptology Journal*: Occasional publication 1, 2014. <http://birminghamegyptology.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Proceedings-of-the-First-Birmingham-Egyptology-Symposium.pdf?06c46e> [22 February 2014].

2 The programme of the Second Annual Birmingham Egyptology Symposium is available on <http://birminghamegyptology.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Schedule.pdf?e82a0c> and the abstracts can be accessed on <http://birminghamegyptology.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Paper-abstracts.pdf?e82a0c> [22 February 2015]. The symposium was organised by Eleanor Simmance and Luke McGarrity (University of Birmingham), with the support and advice of Steven Gregory, Nicki Adderley, Stephanie Boonstra and Zara Shoosmith. The website of Birmingham Egyptology can be accessed on <http://birminghamegyptology.co.uk/> [22 February 2015].

site at Memphis Kom Rabia excavated by the Egypt Exploration Society (EES). The talk focused on diverse approaches to processing and classification of pottery; and thanks to its multicultural approach, it paved the way for the following papers that focused on nationality.

Nationality

The issue of 'nationality' is a controversial topic in Egyptology. This is because, firstly, interpreting ancient ethnicity via modern notions can lead to erroneous assumptions; secondly, the definition of ethnic identity *per se* is in the eye of the beholder.

The paper of Stephanie Boonstra (University of Birmingham) highlighted some of the difficulties in tracing ethnic identity in antiquity via the examination of material culture. Boonstra discussed scarabs from Tell el-Ajjul, dated to the mid-second millennium BC, and manifesting a mixture of Egyptian, Canaanite, Hyksos and Mesopotamian motifs. The speaker concluded that many of these pieces were made on site and in the nearby regions. As a result, Boonstra showed that there was a network of complex interactions between societies located in the southern Levant and in the Nile Delta, and that items, like humans, also have an 'ethnic profile', which is often complicated and multifaceted.

Indeed, ethnic identity is reflected in archaeological finds, and it is only through the examination of artefacts that modern researchers can determine the *modus operandi* of a culture. Benjamin Hinson (University of Cambridge) also elected to work with material culture in his presentation. His talk discussed bells: a group of artefacts that is hardly studied in Egyptological scholarship. Bells were used as musical instruments in the Near East, although when introduced to Egypt (between the late Third Intermediate Period and Late Period) they received an entirely different interpretation by the Egyptians: instead of being associated with music, they received a ritual and funerary role, being placed in children's graves and associated with Bes. Hinson demonstrated that artefacts can undertake various roles and symbolisms and become a matter of personal and ethnic interpretation.

Authority

Overall, authority is well researched in Egyptology, since the evidence (archaeological texts and finds) assists scholars in the comprehension of Egyptian power and administration. Together with ethnic identity, material culture can also express authority as shown by Eleanor Simmance (University of Birmingham) in her talk about the form, provenance and role of sistrophores. Sistrophores are statues that operate as intermediaries between humans and god, and typically bear a prominent sistrum-type emblem – thus their name. These statues are accompanied by inscriptions with a characteristic phraseology which indicates a type of authority which would otherwise be a royal prerogative.

In other cases, authority is reflected in the architecture of temples. In her lecture, Elisabeth Brophy (Keble College, Oxford) showed how religious buildings constructed in Egypt by Roman emperors during the Roman Period, were sometimes adjacent to the Egyptian temples (e.g. the shrine of Imperial cult at Karnak). There is a sharp antithesis in size and style between the religious structures of the Roman era and the grandiose Egyptian temples of the New Kingdom. The former are 'outshined' by the latter, but the relationship between Roman temples and shrines to Egyptian

buildings manifests the continuation and development of authority in Egypt, and the new status quo that the Romans brought to the country.

Individuality

Egyptologists often focus on the individual yet their object of research is usually the palace elite, as this is better documented than extra-palatial individuals. In keeping with this research preference, the paper of Taneash Sidpura (University of Manchester) debated a very controversial issue: the double, or even triple identity of Ahhotep. The name has traditionally been allocated to the wife of King Seqenenra-Tao and mother of king Ahmose, still, the problem is that currently Ahhotep is associated with two coffins: one at Dra Abu el-Naga, and another at Deir el-Bahari. Sidpura thoroughly examined the known family trees of the lady, or ladies, in question and is building up a new hypothesis to determine the most likely owner of the coffin at Dra Abu el-Naga to clarify the controversy about the enigmatic identity of Ahhotep.

Lastly, Barbara Hufft (University of Basel) aimed at comparatively examining ethnic, political, cultural and social identity in Twenty-fifth Dynasty Egypt, when Kushite rulers were based in Thebes. Hufft also focused on the palace, and specifically on the Kushite rulers in Egypt and their varied identities. These rulers viewed themselves as Egyptian pharaohs and Kushite kings at the same time, while they also cultivated a unique sense of individuality and personality. One wonders if, during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty, the multifaceted identity of the one (the ruler) is mirrored in the identity of the masses, and vice versa. In my opinion, the closing talk of the symposium reached similar conclusions.

Closing Talk

The closing talk brought together all three major issues discussed in this conference, with Tony Leahy (University of Birmingham) addressing some of the problems of identifying ethnicity in Upper Egypt during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. Moreover, as Leahy demonstrated, the authority of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty aristocracy in Thebes was correlated with the discussion of how members of the elite felt about their individuality. As an example, the speaker referred to the very realistic statue of Harwa, the Great Steward of the Kushite God's Wife of Amun, Amenirdis. The statue (Cairo JE 37386), which was unearthed in the temple of Karnak, shows Harwa dressed in a loincloth and seated with his right leg crossed and his left leg bent in front of his corpulent belly. The official's obese body and sagging breasts were part of his individuality.

Final remarks

In my opinion, the Second Annual Birmingham Egyptology Symposium succeeded in drawing special attention to some very controversial issues in Egyptology. The papers presented were well-received and generated lively debate. The aims of the symposium were generously met, with the 'Birmingham Egyptology Symposium series' being a channel for academic networking and knowledge exchange. The organisers are planning to publish the conference proceedings within the following months.