

When the Thames Valley went to the Midlands

by Beth Asbury

I came back from a stint living in Cairo just a few months before the *Sacred and Profane: Treasures of Ancient Egypt* exhibition [link: <http://barber.org.uk/sacred-and-profane-2/>] ended at the Barber Institute and missed it. I was really pleased therefore when, during a Thames Valley Ancient Egypt Society (TVAES [link: www.tvaes.org.uk]) Committee meeting a few months ago, our Chairman, John Billman, reported that BE had invited us to see the Eton Myers Collection and even handle some of the objects. Not as many of us as we had hoped took the opportunity to make the trip, but those of us who did had a thoroughly good time and it was great to visit my old stomping ground too!



We were met at the Orchard Learning Resource Centre, up the road from the main University campus, and treated to five papers by the BE team on the theme of communication in ancient Egypt, the subject of the current *Connections* exhibition]. Carl Graves opened the proceedings (after ensuring we were all well-stocked with hot drinks and biscuits!) with an introductory talk about the history of the collection and Birmingham's plans for it during its 15 year loan. I was pleased to learn that there will be a focus on using the objects for teaching, outreach and research, and struck by how similar Major Joseph William Myers (1858-99), pictured left, looked to Christopher Reeves!

[link: www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/connections/index.aspx]

Innovation through Interactions by ceramicist, Dr Carla Gallorini, explored the 'pilgrim flask' as a source of information on cultural exchange, trade and art. As the Eton Myers examples, donated by Gerald Wainwright, are incomplete, they can be examined on the inside and out, leading to the discovery that they were made on a potter's wheel, previously thought not to have been possible! Pottery production in pre-industrial societies, we were told, is usually conservative and does not change shape unless its function also changes. Pilgrim flasks (a selection of which are pictured above right) were not originally Egyptian vessels, but were eventually produced locally. Their introduction seems to have coincided with the introduction of wine amphorae from Mycenae in the 18th Dynasty. The Egyptians took on the Mycenaean form, rather than developing their own wine vessels, and pilgrim flasks were eventually used for perfume oil.



[link: www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/connections/Essays/CGallorini.aspx]

Piano and viola player, Eleanor Simmance, gave us a musical interlude next], having identified two items with musical connections in the collection – a sistrum (the onomatopoeically-named *sesheshet* in ancient Egypt) and a Bes amulet. Music was used to call, placate and worship the gods, scare birds as a hunting aid, entertain farm workers and guests, and developed into a pastime. Musicians seem to have held a reasonable level of social status, but there appears to have been a gender divide with men being harpists and women playing tambourines, for example. Stringed instruments became more common in the New Kingdom and are thought to

have had a foreign origin, but despite research being done to try to work out what ancient Egyptian music actually sounded like, nobody can really be sure.

[link: www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/connections/Essays/ESimmance.aspx]

Steve Gregory's paper, *Visualising Ideology* was the most theoretical of the day, exploring the symbolism of the crowned falcon amulets in the collection. As many amulets have obvious protective qualities, Steve queried what the significance was for ordinary people who instead wore symbols with royal connotations. Drawing parallels with modern Royal Navy badges, he convincingly argued that they showed the wearer was part of a state sponsored institution (perhaps as someone with power delegated by the king), had allegiance to the king or was a follower of the religious ideology of the king as sole intermediary between the gods and mankind. We were all reminded that faience production was probably also a state-run industry.

[link: www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/connections/Essays/SGregory.aspx],



Faience objects in the collection

The last paper of the afternoon was given again by Carl Graves, who discussed *ECM822: A Curious Faience Head*, which he is trying to identify. The 3-4cm tall head is in faience and shows a Nubian with a black painted cruciform wig, suspension loops and a monkey on each shoulder. A search for parallels has so far suggested that it may be Beset, the mother of the leonine dwarf Bes. During the reign of Amenhotep II, Bes took on more human and Nubian-inspired features, so ECM822 may be an example of that development and an attempt to incorporate Beset as a more motherly figure in domestic religion. ECM822 is still an odd example, however, so Carl's research is ongoing and he asked us all to let him know if we found any other examples!

[link: www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/connections/Essays/CGraves.aspx]

Carls' last few words before the group went to have a private viewing of the *Connections* exhibition were a heartfelt statement that there was no point in having shipped ancient Egyptian objects over to the UK, if they are not going to be used. He succinctly put it that otherwise it is just like swapping them from a dirty hole to a clean one and TVAES members agreed. John Billman, our Chairman, voiced his hope that the success of the Eton Myers loan will be a useful model to show other institutions the potential of small, under-researched Egyptology collections.



Worked flint discovered by Heywood Walter Seton- Karr (1859–1938)

The final part of the day led us into a bright, climate-controlled room behind a door Fort Knox would be proud of. Objects from the collection were arranged in waist-high glass cabinets with clear information panels on the walls and inside the cases. Small pieces, like a Bes amulet, were displayed with magnifying glasses, whilst others, such as two pilgrim flasks, were backed with mirrors. I enjoyed exploring the further treasures that were accessible in drawers along one wall and was impressed by the beautiful faience, pottery, flints and metalwork, some still boasting the labels of their proud antiquarian finders!

As someone who wrote a few articles for the old Birmingham Egyptology Newsletter, I am really pleased to see how far Steve Gregory's brainchild has grown since 2003. Birmingham Egyptology (take a breath) with its website, its blog, peer-reviewed journal, regular forum, TuT Project, *Connections* exhibition and forthcoming symposium is going from strength to strength in increasingly exciting ways. I hope that current, and future, undergraduate and postgraduate students do not overlook the brilliant opportunities they have to get involved with it all!