

Conference report: CRE XV University College London and King's College London 9th-12th April 2014

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This year's Current Research in Egyptology conference was organised and hosted by postgraduates at UCL and KCL, the first time the conference has been hosted jointly. Whilst these institutions might normally be sworn enemies, the conference was well-coordinated and cohesive, with seventy-five presentations, and delegates from all over the world, namely Europe, Egypt, North America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. The large organising committee very successfully kept the event, which was said to be the biggest CRE yet, running smoothly – Justin Yoo, Carl Walsh, Hany Rashwan, Stacy Hackner, Massimiliano

Pinarello, Yukiko Kawamoto, Ahmed Mekawy Ouda, Courtney Bobik, Jason Lundock and Federico Ugolini. Speaking to many delegates, it was clear that we all very much enjoyed the event, and it was fantastic to be able to share research and ideas, to network and to make new friends with such a wide range of researchers, very much assisted by the diversity represented in the papers and posters which were collected under this year's theme: 'Ancient Egypt in a Global World'. This report hopes to demonstrate how varied and engaging such conferences can be, and how beneficial they are to all, but in particular to early career researchers and postgraduate students.

Upon arriving for registration at UCL, we were invited on a tour of the Petrie Museum with Lucia Gahlin (Friends of the Petrie Museum/Bloomsbury Summer School) and Ahmed Mekawy Ouda (Cairo University) providing an introduction to the museum, its founding members and associated archaeological teams in Egypt, and the collections, including some of the highlights such as the [Tarkhan Dress](#). For someone who has never visited the Petrie Museum such as myself, it was delightful finally to see the varied and beautiful collections stored there and to learn more about the Museum's history. The tour was a perfect introduction to the conference, as it linked seamlessly to the first key-note lecture by Dr Alice Stevenson, who joined the Museum as curator in July 2013. 'Artefacts of Excavation: Egyptian Archaeology and the Museum' was an introduction to a project being undertaken to research the international distribution of finds from Egypt Exploration Fund/Society ([EES](#)) excavations, 1880-1980. The project hopes to elucidate the changing contexts of world museums and the trends in object acquisition as much as the stories behind the objects themselves. There are to be public and professional workshops and a conference related to the project as it progresses.

Two more key-note lectures were delivered during the conference: by Dr Richard Bussmann (UCL) on Thursday and Dr Chris Naunton (EES) on Saturday. Prof Dominic Rathbone (KCL) was scheduled to deliver Friday's lecture, but was unable to attend due to ill-health - we all wish him a speedy recovery! Dr Bussmann's lecture was entitled 'Egyptian Archaeology and Social Anthropology' and stressed the utility of comparative (but importantly still source-critical) anthropological studies to try to extrapolate people and indeed individuals from the class system in Egyptian society, especially with regard to 'religious' and funerary practices. This involved a detailed look at the material evidence such as votive statuettes, scarabs and amulets. He argued that meaning is not necessarily inherent in symbols, rather meaning is ascribed through practice. Eventually practice might be enacted

as tradition rather than as an expression of the supposed symbolism, and the actors may explain these practices and symbols in different ways, or not explain them at all. In essence, such practices are very personal, small-scale experiences, an ego-centric 'body culture' (an organisation of thoughts towards one's body).

Dr Chris Naunton's lecture, which closed the conference, was concerned with 'Egyptology in 2014'. He explored the changing nature of Egyptological studies and archaeology, in particular because of the economic, political and technological changes which affect archaeology, Egypt itself and the wider world, and the dissemination of knowledge. He enumerated the various projects being undertaken by the EES, in the offices and in the field, including scholarships and skills training being offered in both London and Cairo, facilitating better interaction between our global colleagues. The lecture very much stressed the importance of worldwide connections and public engagement, and as such was a very fitting end to a conference whose theme was 'Ancient Egypt in a Global World'.

This is not the end of this report, of course! There were many fascinating presentations and here I hope to highlight a few which I particularly enjoyed. The programme ranged from studies of single objects to field reports and from specific Egyptian phenomena to inter-cultural connections bringing in Nubian, Levantine and Mediterranean studies. Subjects spanned the entire chronological history of ancient Egypt (Pre-dynastic to first millennium BC) and included literature, religion, economy, trade, burial practices, legal documents and flora and fauna. The variety of the programme is to be very much commended, as is the quality of the research presented. Three papers were given by the Birmingham delegation: Sarah Chapman presented her research into the representation of corpses ('Avoiding Death: Restrictions on the Representation of Corpses in Egyptian Art'), with a particular focus on the Late Period. Many delegates were struck with the unusual images of emaciated or skeletal figures! Edward Mushett Cole's theoretical approach addressed Libyan 'tribal' influences on Egyptian political structure and kingship in the Third Intermediate Period ('Foreign Influences in the Late New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period') and listeners were particularly interested in the comparisons with Hawaiian societal structure, namely the theories of classificatory kinship. Laura Grimshaw and I jointly presented BE's very own Tutankhamun's Texts project ('Texts, Context and Interpretation'), explaining its origins, its aims and potential future work.

One specific session of papers which I attended was especially enjoyable. It began with Maria Nilsson of Lund University in Sweden, whose paper 'Multi-cultural Commemorations: An Epigraphic Journey from Prehistoric Rock Art to Napoleonic Signatures at Gebel el-Silsila' was a summary of the findings from the archaeological team at this site (incidentally, both she and John Ward zipped off to Egypt on the Tuesday following the conference to continue work). The variety of graffiti across the ages, presented mainly through photographs taken on site, was wonderful to see, as was the geographical spread, including an inscription so high in the quarry that even the team have been unable to see it without cameras as of yet. Although unfortunately I did not speak to Maria after her paper, I found this paper doubly interesting considering that I myself chaired a session on graffiti at the BE Forum in October 2013 (see [Forum: previous sessions](#)).

Second in the session was Massimiliano Pinarello of UCL, who presented an engaging paper entitled 'An Archaeological Discussion of Writing Practice: Deconstruction of the Ancient Egyptian Scribe' in which he challenged ideas surrounding the position of scribe and of the hierarchy of Egypt in general, with particular reference to the Old Kingdom. He considered that literacy should perhaps not be a definitive marker of status, rather a better way of modelling Egyptian society was in terms of access – to commodities, communication, social display and legitimation. In essence, one feature of an individual (here their level of literacy) has hitherto been used to demonstrate high status, when in fact another feature (their

level of access) may be more pertinent in this regard. He then suggested that there are four very general layers of society, with access increasing with each successive layer, acknowledging that there is of course much variation within the layers. Massimiliano presented his complex theoretical ideas with a dash of humour thrown in (pictures of a platypus and *mille feuille*, and a rather gleeful countering of Kant), ensuring that the paper was extremely relaxed and enjoyable.

He was followed by Susan Penacho from the University of Chicago, who presented her findings thus far in the study of mud sealings from the Nubian fortresses Uronarti and Askut. In an attempt to combat the lack of proper provenance records for the sealings, her research makes use of a geographic information system (GIS) for spatial analysis of the sealing distribution within the fort and within specific rooms. The GIS randomly distributes the sealing locations within the known, general context (for example, where the records note a room, but not the specific findspot). The spatial distribution is then coupled with an analysis of the designs which form the impressions, which are often personalised for a particular individual. Thus Susan was able to postulate, amongst several other ideas, an individual's sealing activities within a fort, especially where the same sealing design appeared in clusters. Her paper demonstrated that seemingly inconsequential seal impressions offer the potential for a greater understanding into trade practices and exchange between forts and between regions.

Several of the papers displayed an admirable and in some cases almost astonishing volume of research material being dealt with. Katharina Stövesand, who some may recall kindly spoke at the Birmingham Egyptology Forum in January, presented some of her findings from the study of Late Period and Ptolemaic coffins ('Ancient Egyptian Coffins Communicative Media for Religious Visual Strategies'), for which she has created a vast database for her evidence. Melanie Pitkin of Macquarie University is attempting to use monuments to elucidate chronology through 'The Distribution and Dating of False Doors and Funerary Stelae of the First Intermediate Period'. Melanie presented her preliminary analyses, introducing iconographic dating criteria that allow her to order her data-set. This data-set was vast – 640 items – and the various ways she has organised it to aid her research was particularly impressive, if a little bewildering to one unfamiliar with her methodology – numerous maps, charts, symbols, numbers, colours, all allowing her to identify trends and changes. Her research is, in my opinion, extremely exciting and is significant for chronological studies of this lesser-known period of Egyptian history.

It was notable that the word 'liminal' was heard several times during the conference. Beth Ann Judas from the University of Pennsylvania presented on 'Keftiu and Griffins: An Exploration of the Liminal in the Egyptian Worldview', which investigated, in part through comparison of griffin iconography, the idea of 'liminal' peoples such as the Aegean Keftiu, 'good foreigners' who occupied a liminal space between Egyptian cosmic order (*ma'at*) and chaos (*isfet*). This of course also linked very well to the conference theme. Ada Nifosi's paper 'The Liminal Status of the Fetus and the Newborn in Graeco-Roman Egypt' explained how the debated and changing status of mothers and their babies affected medical and legal practices and ethics. The liminal status was also considered appropriate for magical and divining activities. The concept of the 'liminal' also found its way into various other presentations and in the questions and discussions which followed them, such as Caroline Brumbridge's (University of Auckland) paper "'You carried your spear on the testimony of a filthy whore!" Gender Stereotypes and Transgendered Individuals in the *Tale of the Two Brothers*', in which she discussed the liminality of gender as it is experienced by the characters in this story.

This report has hoped to demonstrate the variety which featured at this year's CRE. I would of course love to speak of all the papers I heard, in particular those that were of

relevance to my own research. However, for the sake of brevity, I would direct any reader to the [CRE website](#), where a downloadable version of the programme/abstract booklet can be found. Whilst not all of the papers related directly to the conference theme, including many of the above, this in no way affected their success. The very fact that delegates attended from all over the globe demonstrates that Egyptology is engaging students and researchers across the world, and conferences like CRE are vitally important to maintain this interest. An essential part of any conference is time for delegates to meet, socialise, network and exchange ideas, facilitating the formation of new academic relationships, and the committee must be thanked for providing ample time to this end. Dr Alice Stevenson's key-note on the first day was followed by a wine reception sponsored by the [Friends of the Petrie Museum](#), and the room was abuzz with anticipation of the three days of papers to come. A reception sponsored by the [London Centre for the Ancient Near East](#) (LCANE) was held the following evening, and others on the final two days. Similarly, the tea and lunch breaks provided a relaxing space for refreshment and socialising between papers, as well as for book sales and poster presentations. The receptions and breaks were held in large, attractive spaces within UCL and KCL buildings. Worthy of particular mention are the KCL venues in their Strand Campus, for both Terrace Café (breaks) and Waterfront Bar (Friday's conference party) overlooked the river and offered spectacular views over London's skyline, day and night. The conference dinner held at the Tas Restaurant on Thursday 10th April was also a very pleasant evening. Just down the street from the British Museum, delegates were treated to delicious Turkish cuisine whilst they continued to forge friendships and discuss their research.



From the Waterfront Bar, KCL. Photograph belongs to the author.

All in all, the conference was a definite success, evidenced by the many positive comments shared amongst delegates. Many thanks go to the organising committee as well as the large group of volunteers for all their work which made the event run smoothly. If any criticism must be made, it is that having parallel panels in separate buildings (albeit nearby) in UCL on Thursday meant that delegates wishing to switch during the sessions felt a little rushed at times. In addition, having *three* parallel panels on the final day often made it rather difficult to choose between papers! Nonetheless, it was an event very much enjoyed by all in attendance. Now we all look to next year – the Annual General Meeting was held before lunch on the final day, at which future CRE conferences were discussed, including aspects of the organisation such as the retention of the current website and social media outlets for

future committees. New members of the CRE Permanent Committee were voted in (Justin Yoo, Carl Walsh and James Bennett), who will advise and support the hosts of conferences to come. Out of the three worthy bids for CRE XVI (University of Oxford, Library of Alexandria and Jagiellonian University, Warsaw), the University of Oxford was successful, meaning next year CRE will return home once more, the last time being 2006. Solène Klein and Christelle Alvarez presented an impressive line-up for key-note speakers and proposed the theme 'Travel in Ancient Egypt'. In the following lunch break, I accused them of reading BE's metaphorical mind, for we had considered that exact theme for our Symposium next year! We will of course, think of another, and we all look forward to next year's CRE, both for the papers and to meet old and new friends once more.



Delegates of CRE XV.

Photograph courtesy of Chloe Ward and CRE XV. More photographs from the conference can be viewed on the CRE XV Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/CREXV?fref=photo>