"American Research Center in Egypt, Fifty-Third Annual Meeting", Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, 26th - 28th April 2002

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This year the members of the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) gathered at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, to discuss and debate a range of topics pertaining to all periods of Egyptian civilisation and culture. Speakers included students and staff from universities, museums and related institutions from across the US, as well as several contributors from international institutions, two affiliated with University College London. Just over 110 papers were presented; 100 of these were devoted to topics dealing with the ancient periods, while only 10 papers addressed the medieval and modern periods. All contributions were organised into eighteen panels and sessions, with two to four sessions running simultaneously throughout the conference. This unavoidably restricted the range of papers to which the reviewer could listen, therefore this review is based on those papers attended, in conjunction with information gleaned from the conference programme and abstracts.

At the outset, the titles of the sessions seemed to signal that this was going to be yet another conference where conventional approaches would predominate. Not surprisingly, four sessions were dedicated to interpreting art and architecture. Conservation and preservation, and field reports were allotted two sessions each. Five separate sessions were based on historical/chronological divisions: History, Early Egypt, Recent Trends and Advances in the Study of Late Period Egypt, Mamluk Studies, and Early Modern and Contemporary Egypt. The remaining sessions were: Collections, Philology and Literature, Religion, and a curiously named session, Science, Technology and Anthropology, which I will discuss further below.

Unique to this year's proceedings was a special round-table discussion held to discuss Egypt in light of the events of September 11, 2001. This discussion drew attention to the ways in which Egyptology (a term used in this review to encompass all studies of Egypt, ancient and modern) is influenced by current political circumstances. This discussion was valuable in that it demonstrated that, as Egyptologists, we need to be increasingly aware that constructions of the past are very much situated in the present, and to ask questions about the factors which engender these constructions such as, how, why, when, by whom and for whom.

As for the papers themselves, several related to the early phases of Egyptian history. Taking a light-hearted approach, archaeologist and anthropologist Harold Dibble (University of Pennsylvania) made the very serious point that the profusion of archaeological data from Egypt's historical periods has been permitted to overshadow earlier material, leaving Egypt's prehistory largely unstudied. Dibble reported on the findings of the Abydos Survey for Palaeolithic Sites (ASPS) project which con-

ducted a reconnaissance survey of the Abydos area in Upper Egypt. Among their discoveries, the Survey encountered Acheulian and other Palaeolithic lithic scatters with excellent stratigraphic integrity, thus affirming the potential of such research to contribute to our understanding of early human occupation in Egypt, as well as hominid dispersal out of Africa.

Also reporting on fieldwork was Renée Friedman (British Museum), discussing recent discoveries at the important Predynastic-Early Dynastic centre of Hierakonpolis. Excavations have yielded the burials of two elephants and, rather uniquely for Egyptian burial practice, evidence for the dismemberment and rearticulation of human remains.

In an iconographic analysis of Late Predynastic seals and sealings, Jane Hill (University of Pennsylvania) examined the development of writing in the Predynastic Period by looking at the glyptic styles that they bear. She noted the melding of Egyptian, Nubian and Syrian imagery and proposed a seriation of seals based on four glyptic styles.

Referring to burial evidence, Ellen Morris (University of Chicago) revisited the debate regarding the status of First Dynasty mastaba tombs at the cemetery sites of Saqqara in Lower Egypt and Abydos in Upper Egypt. While the latter are generally regarded as 'royal', Morris argued that based on the comparative tomb size, types of burial equipment and the presence of retainer burials, perhaps royal status should be reassigned to certain Saqqara mastabas.

In a related paper, Laurel Bestock (New York University) made the observation that Early Dynastic subsidiary retainer burials are usually attributed to members of the royal court, yet these types of tombs are atypical in that they are small and modest. Atypical or not, Bestock aptly pointed out that Egyptologists should be questioning the assumption that tomb size and proximity to royal burials are directly equivalent to social status.

Nicholas Picardo (University of Pennsylvania) spoke on the so-called 'Reserve Heads' of the Old Kingdom. Found only in the Giza/Memphite region, these stone heads were carefully carved and then deliberately damaged before being placed in the tomb. Picardo explored physical, magical and conceptual aspects of these enigmatic objects in an innovative analysis that drew on semantic and iconographic themes of headlessness or decapitation in the Book of the Dead and other funerary literature.

Taking evidence from the funerary sphere into other aspects of life, Nozumo Kawai (Johns Hopkins University) traced changes in private mortuary architecture dating to the Amarna and post-Amarna Periods and their relation to a shift in religious ideology. Although Egyptologists often speak in definitive terms of this transition, Kawai found a degree of continuity that does not support a hard and fast break between the two periods. Richard Fazzini (Brooklyn Museum of Art) suggested that an increase in the depiction of women in statuary, reliefs, and inscriptions during the Third Intermediate Period may indicate a rise in the status of woman within Egyptian society.

Taking a fresh approach to the interpretation of Amarna Period banqueting scenes, Lyn Green (Royal Ontario Museum) incorporated an anthropological model from the work of Michael Dietler and Brian Hayden (2001) to explore possible symbolic meanings of feasting in ancient Egypt.

The session on the Late Period, chaired by Richard Jasnow (Johns Hopkins University), highlighted issues of import to all phases of Egyptian history, including problems of historical continuity and cultural interaction. Discussants appealed for the re-examination of traditional perceptions which regard the Late Period as a continuous chronological phase, as this is the longest of all the chronological divisions in the Pharaonic Period, yet is characterised by multiple episodes of foreign occupation and political upheaval. In addition, the need for the integration of related fields, and co-operation across traditional disciplinary boundaries, were urged as means of providing a more complete account of the relationship between Egypt and its neighbours during the Late Period. Reference was made to the work of Sally-Ann Ashton (Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge) on the interpretation of Greek and Egyptian traditions as offering innovative ways of examining such dynamic intercultural relationships. Joseph Manning (Stanford University) also expressed the need to explain discontinuity as well as continuity, and to give equal attention to processes of change – an important point to be considered by investigators of all phases of Egypt's history.

The final afternoon of the conference culminated with a session entitled Science, Technology and Anthropology. This grouping of topics caught my attention because it seemed to suggest several problems. First, these three topics, each important in their own right, lacked a unifying theme and were combined in the session in a seemingly haphazard way, rather like a default session that might as well have been entitled 'Miscellaneous'. In addition, there seemed to be a general ambiguity with how to incorporate subjects of a scientific nature into the conference. For instance, the distinction between scientific practice as engaged in by ancient Egyptians, and scientific practice as engaged in by the modern investigator in order to study the former, lacked articulation.

However, I was heartened to see that, in addition to the papers by Dibble and Green mentioned above, anthropological perspectives received specific consideration. The application of anthropological approaches to the study of ancient Egyptian society is certainly not new to the field. Work in the mid-1970s (see Baines 1976; Weeks 1979) and revisited in the 1990s (for example see Lustig 1997) has demonstrated that employing anthropological approaches can only enhance our interpretations of the wealth of material available from ancient Egypt. Yet, I cannot help but ask why issues of such significant consequence as the theories and methods by which we study the people who produced the material collected in the field – the art, architecture, and artefacts so meticulously described, catalogued, conserved and preserved – are relegated to a small space at the very end of the conference, to be discussed when the majority of attendees have already left for the car parks, train stations or airports.

Unfortunately, anthropology and social theory in general remain largely neglected in mainstream Egyptology and have yet to be fully embraced as an integral part of our discipline. Still, this concluding session offered interesting papers, including a comparative study on twins which highlighted the potential value of ethnographic work in modern Egypt. Based on her interviews, Yasmin el-Shazly (Johns Hopkins University) suggested that certain perceptions of twins today may represent a continuation of attitudes present in ancient Egyptian society.

While ARCE plays a vital role in shaping the direction of Egyptology within the US, and US co-operation with Egypt, many of the issues raised at this conference are relevant to Egyptologists everywhere. Traditional notions of historical continuity and discontinuity, and views of Egypt as a self-contained entity set against emic and etic perspectives of Egypt within its broader geographical, and socio-cultural context, all require re-evaluation. Moreover, the role of theoretical perspectives and approaches warrants much more consideration. Some may argue that Egyptology does not need a theoretical underpinning. I would counter that any approach, methodology, or interpretation is situated within some theoretical framework, whether the investigator is cognisant of it or not. The proceedings of this year's ARCE conference demonstrate the significance and sheer volume of work being undertaken by Egyptologists world-wide. It is therefore increasingly vital that this work moves beyond traditional epistemological constraints to a critically aware, reflexive, and theoretical Egyptology.

References

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