



Simons, F. (2011) 'Conference Report: The Third British Egyptology Congress British Museum, London 11th -12th of September 2010' *Rosetta* 9: 109-112.

http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_09/shorter_pieces/simons_bec3.pdf

Conference Report: The Third British Egyptology Congress

British Museum, London 11th -12th of September 2010

Frank Simons

University of Birmingham

The third British Egyptology Congress, organised by the Egypt Exploration Society, the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan at the British Museum and University College London, was held at the British Museum on 11th and 12th September 2010. Over 60 papers were presented on a wide variety of topics.

The first day began with a plenary lecture by Patricia Spencer on the current and future state of the EES as a result of the dramatic withdrawal of government funding in 2006. The tone of this paper was broadly positive, but it emphasised the need to make changes in the structure of the society.

Following this, the congress divided into four separate panels, each containing four papers: 'The New Kingdom and First Millennium' chaired by Chris Naunton, 'Fieldwork, Sites and Monuments I: the EES' chaired by Ian Shaw, 'Egyptology in Practice, in Museums and Online' chaired by Marcel Marée, and 'Death and the Dead' chaired by Sonia Zakrzewski.

The first paper given in the first panel was also, unfortunately, among the least interesting given at the congress. Angus Graham spoke on 'Grain collection and delivery in a Ramesside landscape' and while I accept that I was probably not the target audience of such a paper, it must be said that the paper did not hold my attention. However, it should be pointed out that the author was a postgraduate student, not an experienced academic as many of the other speakers were, and so allowance should be made for the fact that his presentation was not all that it could have been. The final paper in this panel was given by one of the more senior academics in attendance and was among the most entertaining of the congress. 'Peftiauawybast, or how to upset your colleagues' by Robert Morkot, detailed how, as a result of the publication in an obscure South American journal of an article

arguing for a 70 year change in the accepted chronology of the Third Intermediate Period, the author nearly lost his job at the University of Exeter.

After lunch, there was a second plenary paper: 'The Written and the Remembered' delivered by John Tait. He discussed recent attempts to discover the 'oral literature' of ancient Egypt through a comparison with other societies in Europe and the Near East. The work of scholars such as Milman Parry and Albert Lord, who recorded oral literature as it was actually performed in 1930s Bosnia, makes it possible to understand the nature of oral literature and its connection to written literature. As such a comparative approach can be useful to give some idea of the extent and nature of Egyptian oral literature.

For a second time the congress split into four panels of four papers each: 'Conception and Presentation of Ancient Egypt' chaired by Wendy Monkhouse, 'History of Egyptology/Reception Studies I: the EES' chaired by Alice Stevenson, 'Artistic Production' and 'Fieldwork, Sites and Monuments II' chaired by Patricia Spencer.

The first paper in the fourth panel, 'The age of the Great Sphinx' by John Wall, discussed the much debated topic of 'who carved the Great Sphinx?' Basing his proposed date on the contemporaneous date of the Sphinx temple, Wall concluded that Khafre is the most likely candidate for the builder, and not, as others have argued, Khufu, Djedefre, or a civilisation 10,000 years earlier. The third paper of the first panel, 'The presentation and perception of Nubian identity' by Sally-Ann Ashton, was a very interesting account of the author's travel and work in Nubia and the Sudan. It discussed the changes which Nubian culture is currently experiencing as a result of, amongst other things, the construction of the Aswan dam. The final paper in the same panel, Alan Lloyd's 'Constructing an Egyptian conceptual world', was, in my opinion, the best paper delivered. It laid out, in the clearest terms imaginable, some of the major aspects of Egyptian belief about the universe and their place within it. Particularly impressive in this paper were the discussion of the '14 components of the body' and the explanation of the nature of the *ḥw* (Akhu). Both of these concepts are crucial to understanding Egyptian belief, and I have never before seen them quite so clearly described.

Mark Lehner's keynote lecture 'Khentkawes of Giza: New light on a well-known site' followed. This gave a thorough and thought-provoking account of recent work on the Giza plateau. This was followed by a reception in the Egyptian sculpture gallery.

The second day opened with a plenary talk given by John Taylor, curator of the Egypt and Sudan galleries, on the recent work of the British Museum, including the current Book of the Dead exhibition and the re-opening of the British Museum Reading Room. This was followed by the third session of four panels of four papers each. 'Funerary Practices and Beliefs' chaired by Aidan Dodson, 'Cult Practice and Religious Beliefs' chaired by Karen Exell, 'Script, Language and Texts' chaired by John Tait, and 'Iconography and Representation' chaired by Roo Mitcheson.

The first paper of the third panel, 'Writing as a weapon in Egyptian letters to the dead' by Angela McDonald, was an intriguing re-evaluation of the small corpus of inscribed bowls. McDonald discussed the letters in terms of their material, focussing on the link between the bowl and the text, which enabled her to recognize a very wide range of details impossible to find through an analysis of the text alone. Particularly intriguing was the discussion of the iconicity of hieratic – the way in which hieratic signs are sometimes altered slightly to change the semantic meaning, or for religious reasons. Previously I had seen this only in hieroglyphic texts, and was unaware that hieratic showed the same changes. The second paper in the first panel, 'Entrance porticoes: a ritual stage in private tombs of the Old Kingdom' by Violaine Chauvet, discussed the conceptual purpose of porticoes (monumental entrances supported by columns or pillars) in tombs of the late Old Kingdom. The author concluded that porticoes offer all the essential religious features of the superstructure of a tomb.

It is difficult to see why the final paper in the same panel, 'A newly identified fragment from the pyramid of Pepy I' by Carolyn Routledge, was a paper at all. While not exactly uninteresting, it was basically the story of a two piece jigsaw puzzle. The basic idea was that a stone in Liverpool fits in a hole in the wall of the tomb it came from. Admittedly, the paper demonstrated the history of the stone from the 19th century until 1973 when it arrived in Liverpool, but the paper should really have been a thousand word note in a journal, not a half hour talk at a conference.

The final plenary talk, 'Zones of transition: conserving cultural heritage sites in the living environment of Egypt today' by Michael Jones, followed. This detailed the work of the American Research Centre in Egypt at a number of sites in Egypt and discussed the worth of heritage and conservation. These are often just accepted as good things, but, Jones argued, we should attempt to understand for whom they are good and why.

This was followed by the final session of four panels, each consisting of just three papers: 'Warfare and the Military' chaired by Alan Lloyd, 'The History of Egyptology/Reception II' chaired by John J. Johnston, 'Fieldwork, Sites and Monuments III: Gurob' chaired by Penny Wilson, and 'Identity and Self-Presentation' chaired by Elizabeth Froom.

It may have been that the early mornings had caught up with me by this point, or I may have chosen the wrong papers, but the papers I attended in this session were my least favourite of the conference. The first paper in the first panel, 'Battlefield remains? The interpretation of weaponry in the Bronze Age Egypt and the Levant' by Dan Boatwright, was, in fairness, very well presented. However, I found it very hard to maintain an interest in graphs showing the various metal contents of weapons. The second paper in the same panel, 'Levantine logistical concerns for the ancient Egyptian military in the Late Bronze Age' by Nicholas Wernick, had the opposite problem. While the topic was quite interesting, the presentation of it was much less clear, so much so that at times it was difficult to follow what was being said. However, as before, allowance must be made for the fact that the author was a postgraduate student, and so comparison with senior and experienced academics is probably a little unfair.

At the end of the final session closing remarks for the congress were given by Alan Lloyd. With very few notable exceptions, the congress was very informative and entertaining. The hosts, speakers and staff are all to be thanked for a most enjoyable conference.

For a full programme and abstracts please see the review by Marsia Bealby in this volume.