

Essex Egyptology Group - Meeting Report by Alison Woollard
Sunday 3 November 2024

Dr Carl Graves: *Searching for the Lost Cities of Egypt*

In November we were very pleased to welcome Carl Graves, director of the Egypt Exploration Society, to Witham after a gap of nearly 10 years. He spoke to us about the search for the lost cities of Egypt and encouraged us to think about what 'lost' might mean and what exactly we might be searching for. Cities do not mean just the stones but places where people lived and worked. Lost cities might be simply ones which are/were unknown to western explorers. Settlements are constantly changing with examples such as the clearing of the avenue of sphinxes at Luxor or the removal of cemeteries in Cairo in order to create new roads.

Carl explored five cities, the first being Itj Tawy, the missing capital of the Middle Kingdom which is presumed to be close to the burials of Amenemhat I and Senwosret I at Lisht. The complete absence of remains has led scholars to build a picture of the settlement based on inscriptions and references in the story of Sinhue.

The fortress at Buhen is known in great detail from excavations and photographs but is now 'lost' under the waters of Lake Nasser. Its long history started as a trading centre in the fourth dynasty but it also had an important defensive role as is shown by the monumentality of its structure which was increased and altered a number of times. There is evidence of the mixing of Egyptian and Nubian culture.

Earthquakes, the gradual rising of the water levels and the destruction caused by centuries of wars has resulted in the loss of parts of Alexandria. Carl explored the fusion of Greek, Roman and Egyptian culture in the city which was founded by Alexander the Great and used as the capital city of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Parts of Cairo have been lost in the same way as successive invasions settled and rebuilt sections of the city.

The last 'city' was one which few people have heard of: the lost or mythical oasis of Zerzura which was the subject of stories told by explorers of the western desert. It first appears in the thirteenth century tale as being the site of treasure but then John Wilkinson Gardiner reports being told in 1835 of the ruins of a city in the desert. In the 1930s the Zerzura Club was formed by adventurers, soldiers and Egyptologists who met once a year in order to report on their searches for the lost oasis. One of their number was László Almásy who became the subject of Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient*.