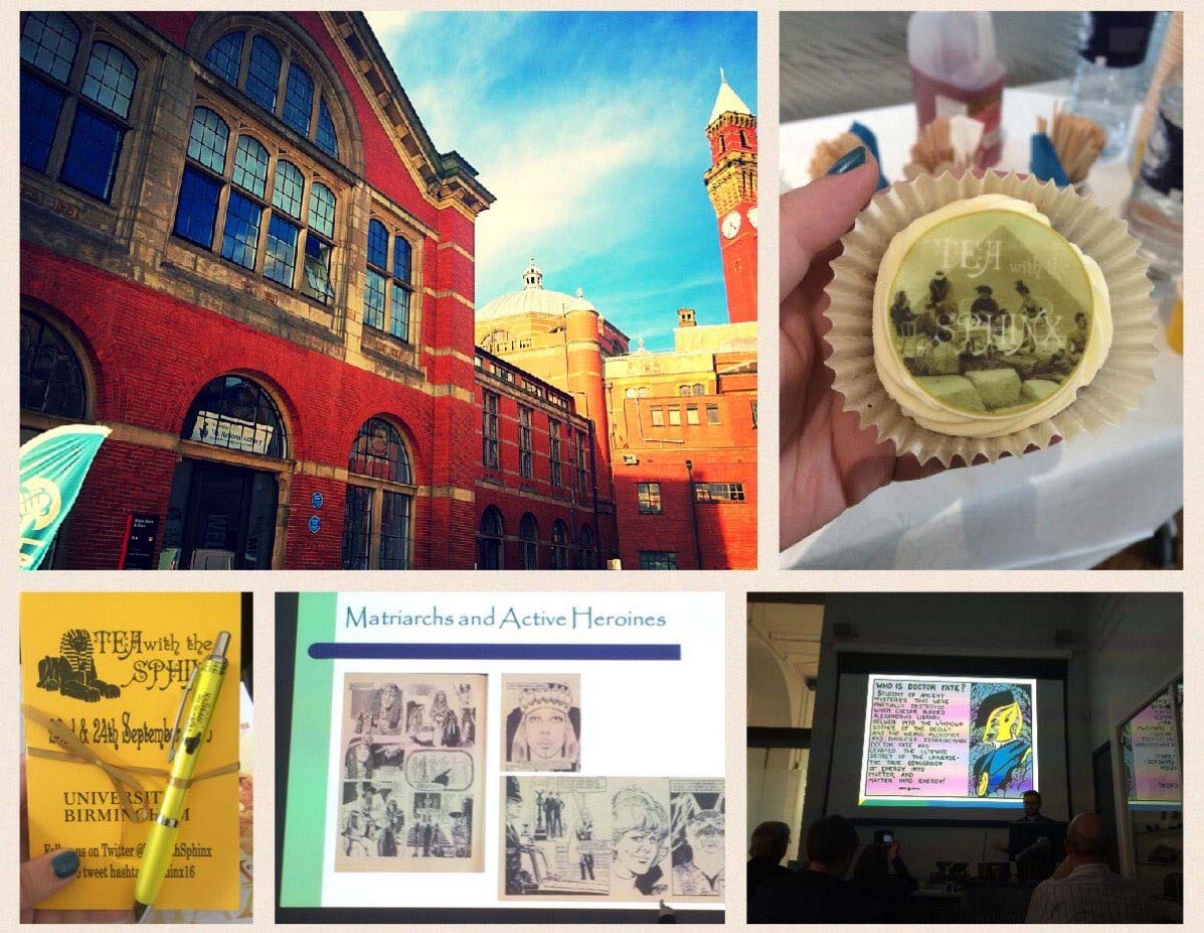
# Tea with the Sphinx:
# Ancient Egypt & the Modern Imagination

*Eleanor Dobson* & *Nichola Tonks*




Source: Mara Gold

On 23 and 24 September, we held a conference at the University of Birmingham entitled 'Tea with the Sphinx: Ancient Egypt and the Modern Imagination'. This event, generously supported by the Past & Present Society, the Birmingham Research Institute for History and Cultures, the British Association for Victorian Studies, the British Association for Romantic Studies, and the English Department at the University of Birmingham, sought to interrogate the 'waves' of Egyptomania stimulated since Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt in 1798, which saw the history and iconography of ancient Egyptian civilisation drawn upon for all varieties of purposes.

### ***The Mummy*** **(1932)**

The evening before the conference we held a screening of Karl Freund's *The Mummy* (1932), a film whose narrative tropes might be considered nineteenth-century in origin. Jane C. Loudon's *The Mummy!: Or a Tale of the Twenty-Second Century* (1827) (heavily influenced by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* [1818]) is considered the first modern work to feature a reanimated mummy,

presenting an evil Cheops brought back to life by an electric spark. We might also chart the predecessors of the Egyptologists in *The Mummy* back to the early nineteenth century: Bonaparte's expedition involved the production of the multi-volume *Description de l'Égypte* (1809-1829), and the resultant studies of Egypt's ancient history and monuments led to the emergence of the scholarly field of Egyptology. Before achieving success in the film industry, one of *The Mummy*'s screenwriters, John L. Balderston, had been a journalist during the Tutankhamun excavations: there is also evidence of this influence upon the film, which attempts to marry Egyptological realism with supernatural fantasy.

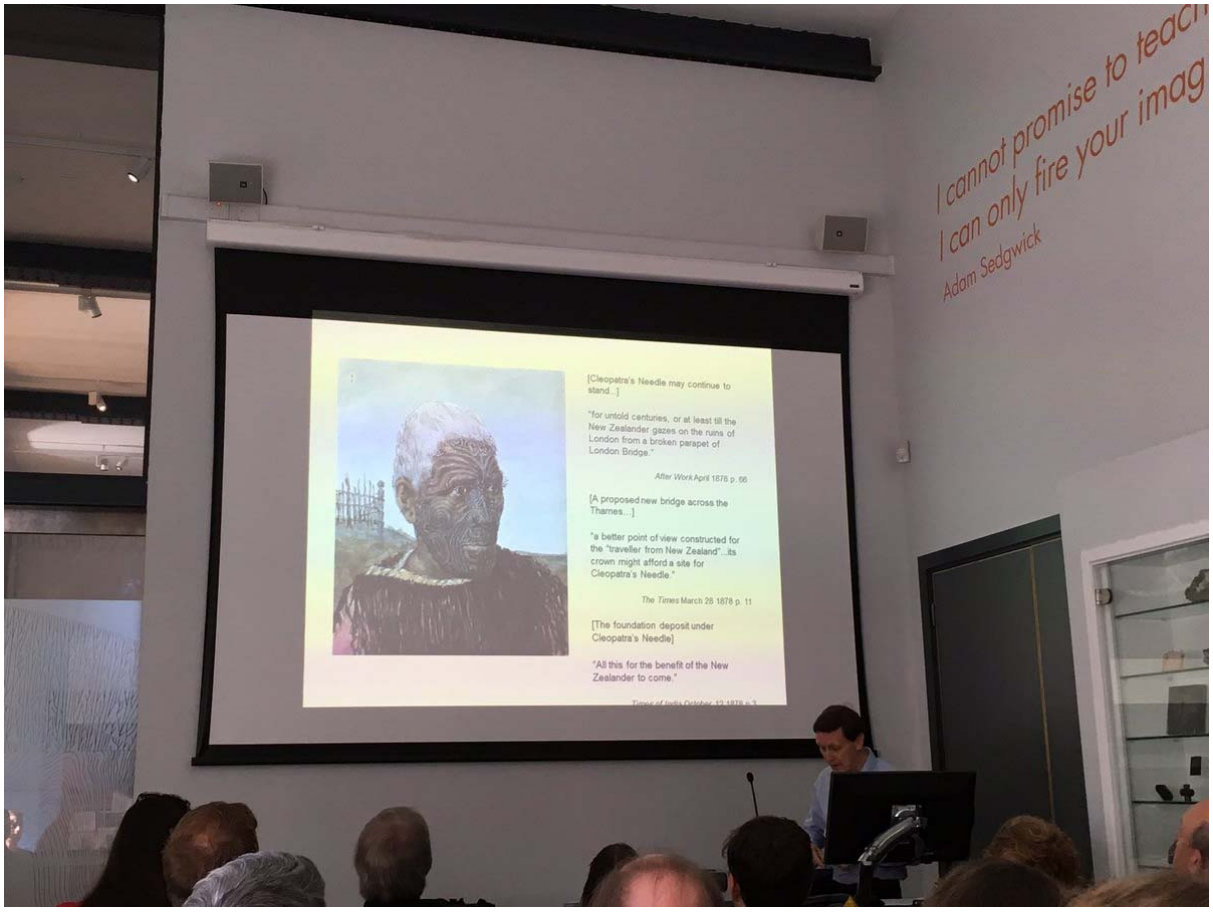
**Keynote: Chris Naunton**

The conference itself was opened by Chris Naunton, whose keynote paper 'The Popular *vs.* the Scientific in Egyptology' emphasised the importance of popularisers over the course of the development of the Egyptological discipline, largely held to have begun at the outset of the nineteenth century. Naunton focused in particular on the founding and development of the Egypt Exploration Society (originally titled the Egypt Exploration Fund), and its work up until the present day, as well as its priorities for research (and these priorities' relationship with funding bodies and the general public).Particularly intriguing was Naunton's discussion of the Amarna excavations which had been filmed by John Pendlebury; this footage not only recorded the dig, but featured scenes of the Egyptologists involved in games, showcasing the work and play that was taking place in Egypt at the time.


Source: Tea with the Sphinx

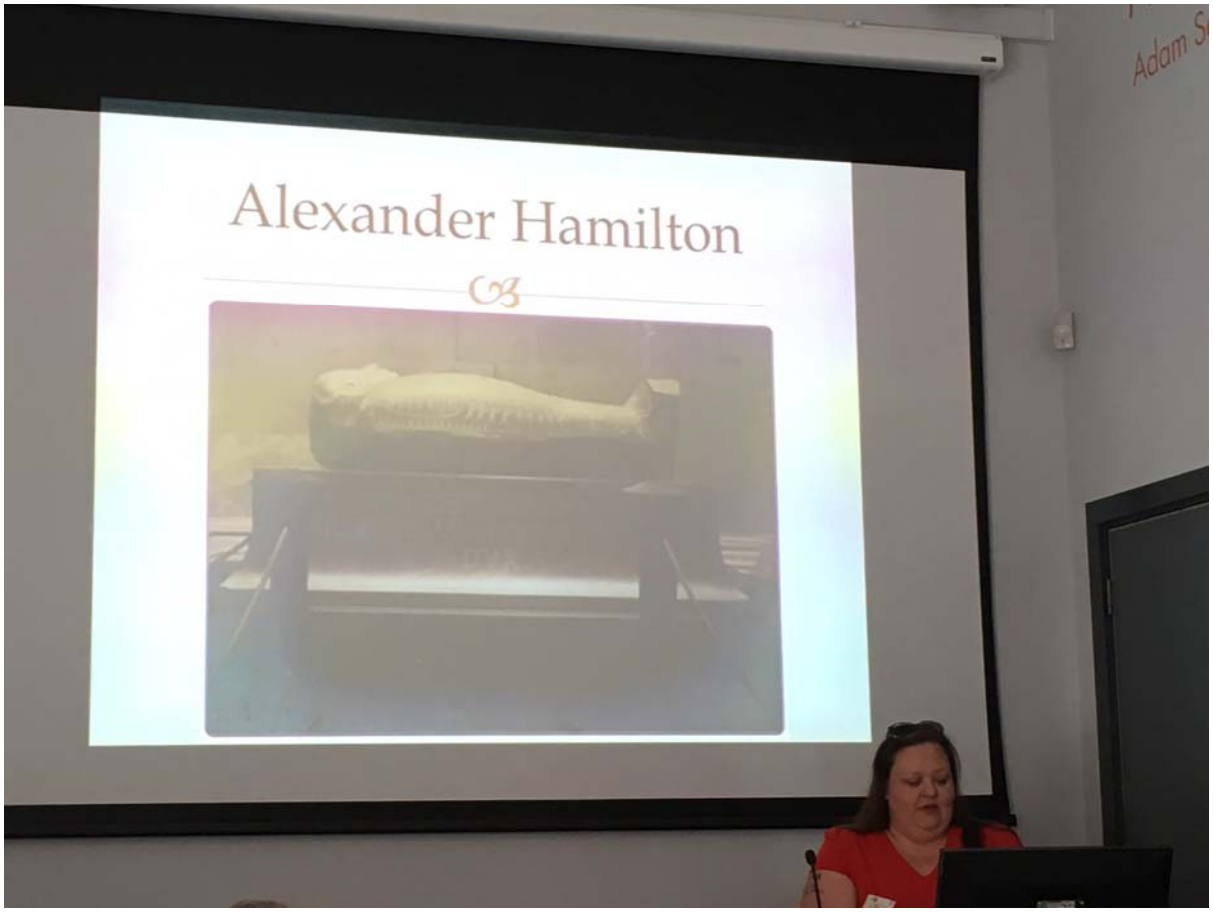
**Panel 1: Death**

Chris Elliott's paper addressed Cleopatra's Needle and the way in which the antiquity of the Needle could act not only as a witness to the achievements of the civilisation that had produced it, but also to its decline and fall, and by extension forecast the same fate for the British Empire, and for London as its capital. Among those imagining what the Needle, already thousands of years old, might subsequently witness thousands of years in the future, was, as Elliot demonstrated, Waynman Dixon, who with his brother John was largely responsible for bringing the Needle to London. Such speculations on the obelisk as mute witness to the decline and fall of the Empire that had uprooted and relocated it were part of a wider use of ancient Egypt in this way, perhaps most familiar from Shelley's sonnet *Ozymandias*, but also involving the unexpected presence of the New Zealander on London Bridge.



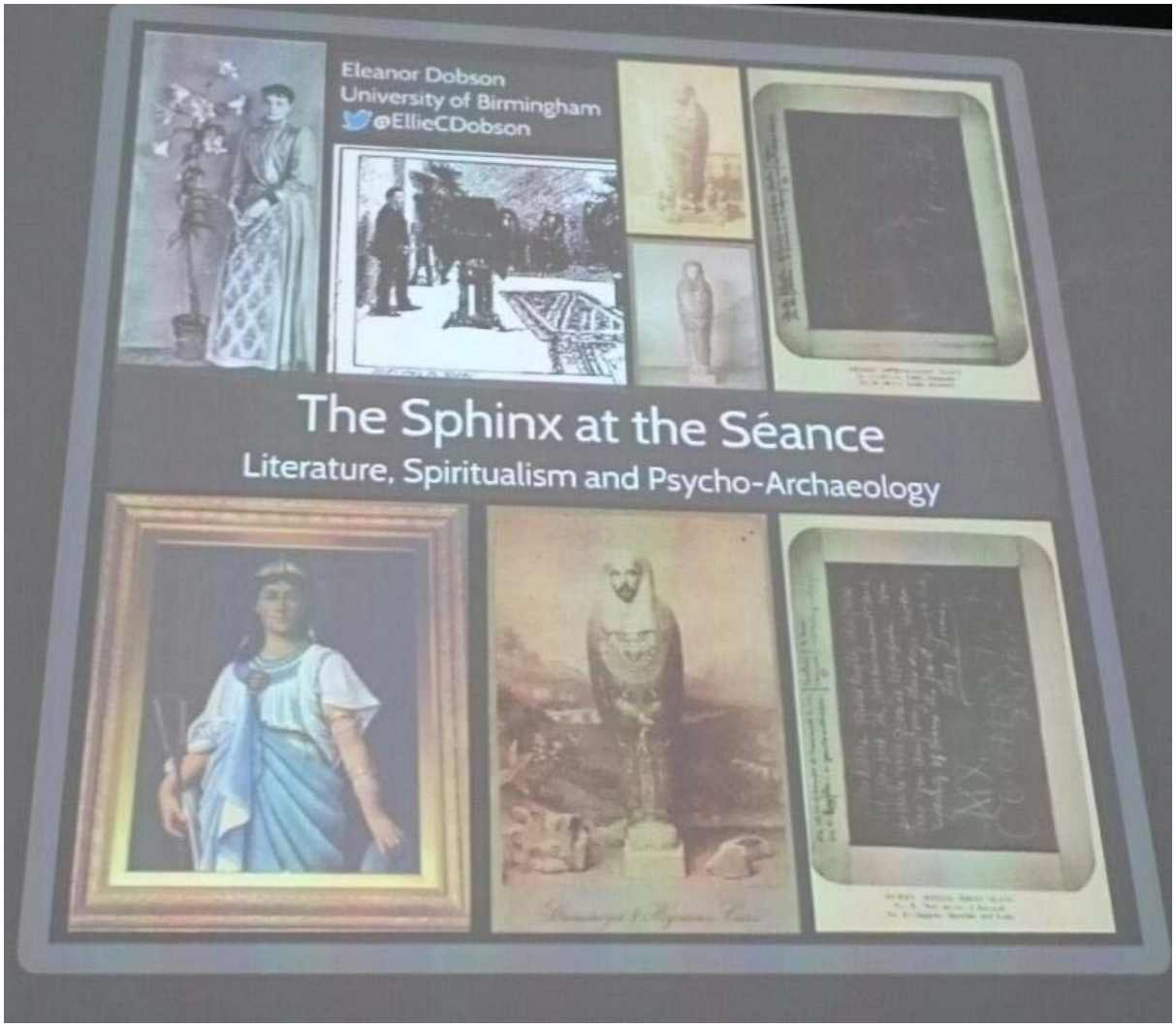

Source: Angela Stienne

Nichola Tonks's paper scrutinised tombstones, plans for Egyptian-style burial pyramids and other Egyptianising funerary material culture, bringing to light the ways in which ancient Egyptian ideas and techniques were woven throughout British burials in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. Case studies included the burial of Alexander, 10th Duke of Hamilton, who nurtured a passion for Egyptian antiquities, demonstrated (most eccentrically) by his collection of two Egyptian sarcophagi. One of these was to become the vessel in which Hamilton was buried (his body was mummified by Thomas Pettigrew who is best known for his high-profile of mummy unwrappings in the 1830s).




Source: Angela Stienne

Eleanor Dobson's paper uncovered the narratives – both fictional and (purportedly) factual – in which an ancient Egyptian presence made itself known in the séances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dobson considered the narratives of spiritualist mediums alongside authors such as Bram Stoker, arguing that such links between the modern and the ancient across these media were used to affirm the popular belief that the modern 'West' was the natural inheritor of the mysticism and wisdom of the near 'East'. This entwining of modern occultism and magic with ancient artefacts and individuals, she claimed, allowed for the envisioning of a closer relationship with ancient Egypt – not merely one in which the British might express imperialistic attitudes of entitlement, but one with a light-hearted element of fantasy and roleplay, as society ladies attended parties dressed as ancient queens, and tourists had their faces superimposed onto sphinxes and sarcophagi.



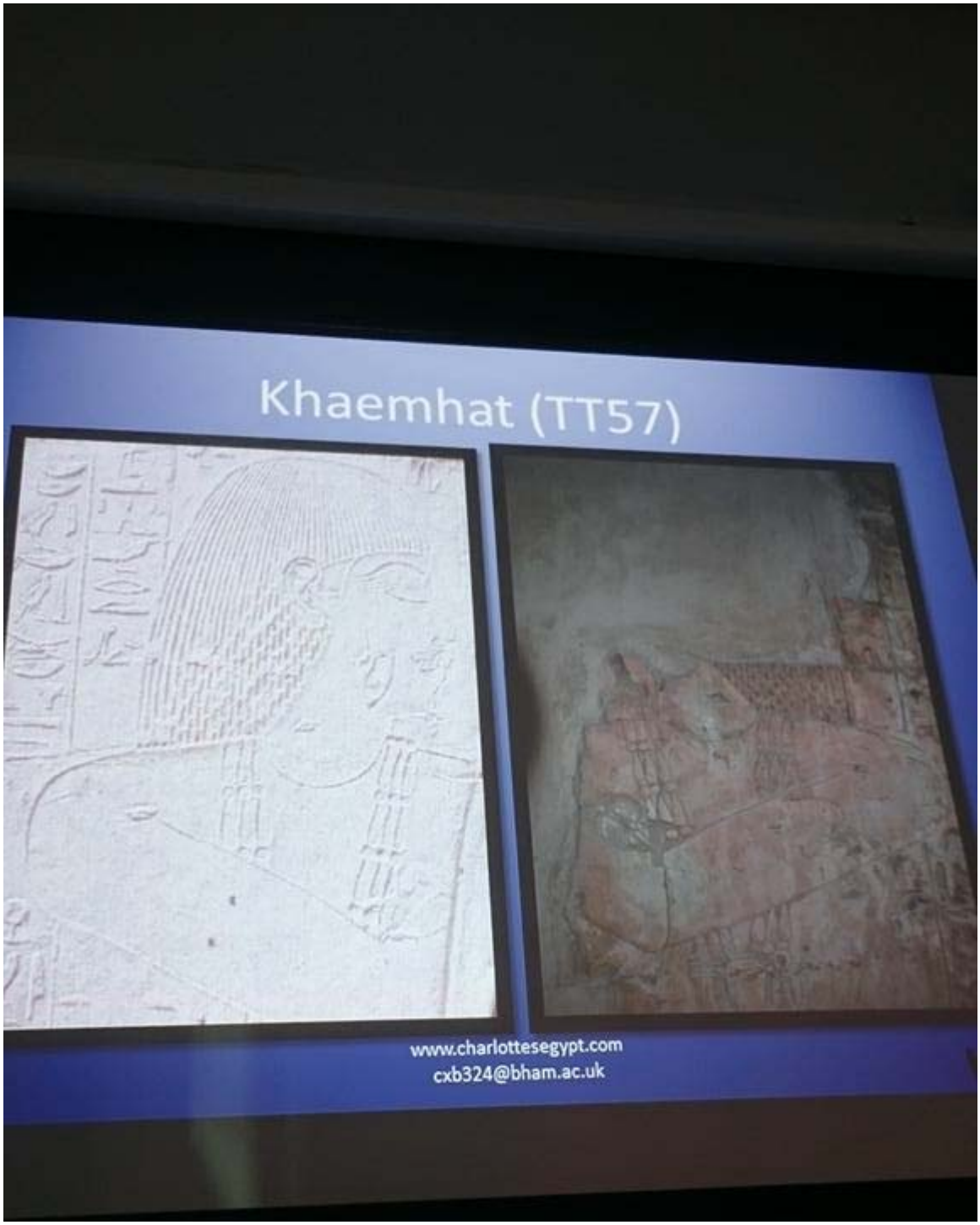

Source: Nickianne Moody

**Panel 2: Travel**

Louise Ellis-Barrett's paper addressed archival materials relating to 'the forgotten Father of Egyptology', John Gardner Wilkinson, who first arrived in Egypt in 1821 (leaving, on this first of a number of visits, in 1833). Ellis-Barrett showed a number of rarely-seen sketches and notebooks, proposing that drawings featuring an unknown male figure might be a depiction of Wilkinson himself.


Source: Angela Stienne

Charlotte Booth's paper explored the practice of making paper squeezes as mementos of travellers' journeys to Egypt throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These were produced by placing wet paper on carved inscriptions and beating them into place with a brush, leaving a 3D representation of the inscription when dry. Using the squeezes held in the Grantham Collection in Lincoln as a case study, Booth demonstrated how these squeezes tell the story of the Nile journey of Alice Lieder.

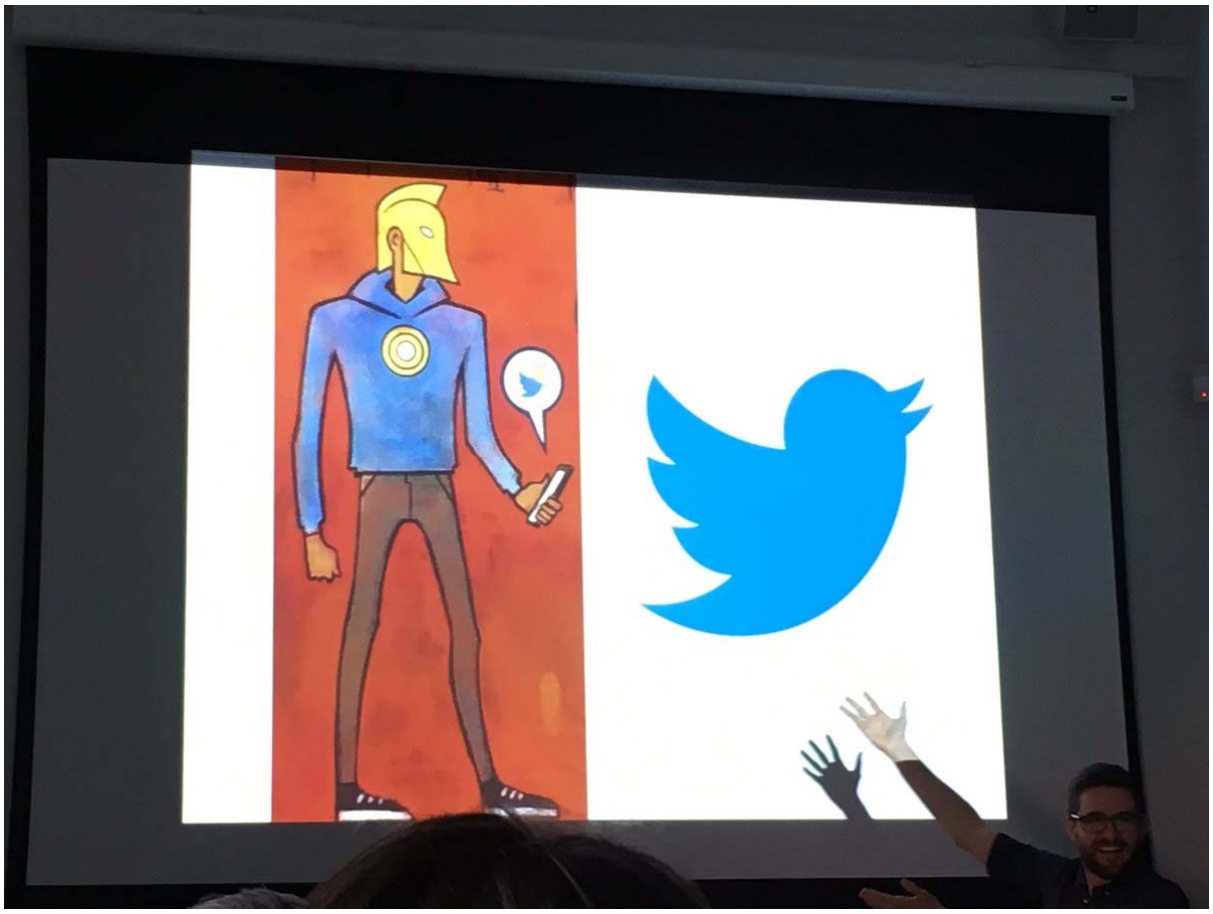



Source: Nickianne Moody

**Panel 3: Comics**

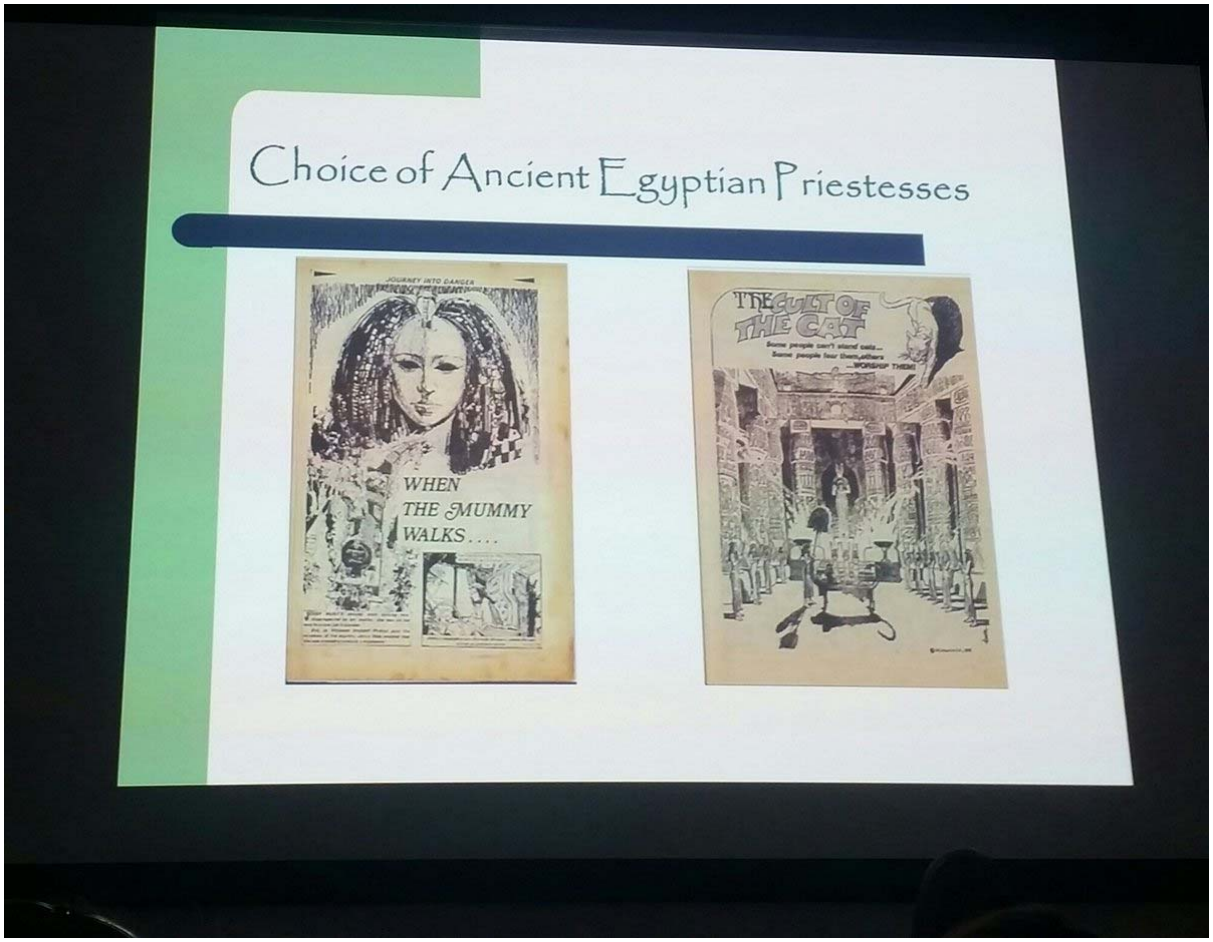
Dan Potter presented a paper on the DC Comics superhero 'Doctor Fate'. Debuted in 'More Fun Comics' in 1940 and later billed as 'America's Most Unusual Adventure Character', his origin, powers and storylines are interlaced with Egyptian themes. The most recent holder of the mantle, Khalid 'Kent' Nelson is an Egyptian-American medical student. Having assumed the 'Helm of Thoth' – the source of the power of the character – he is immediately drawn into conflict with the god Anubis, a conflict which straddles modern New York, Egypt (both modern

and ancient) and the *Duat* incorporating elements of the Egyptian revolution, ancient myth and of course the world of the superhero. Potter analysed the reception of archaeology, ancient Egypt and its iconography related to the character of Doctor Fate from the Golden Age of comics to the present day, with a particular focus upon the most recent series dedicated to this hero, entitled: 'The Blood of the Pharaohs'.



Source: Angela Stienne

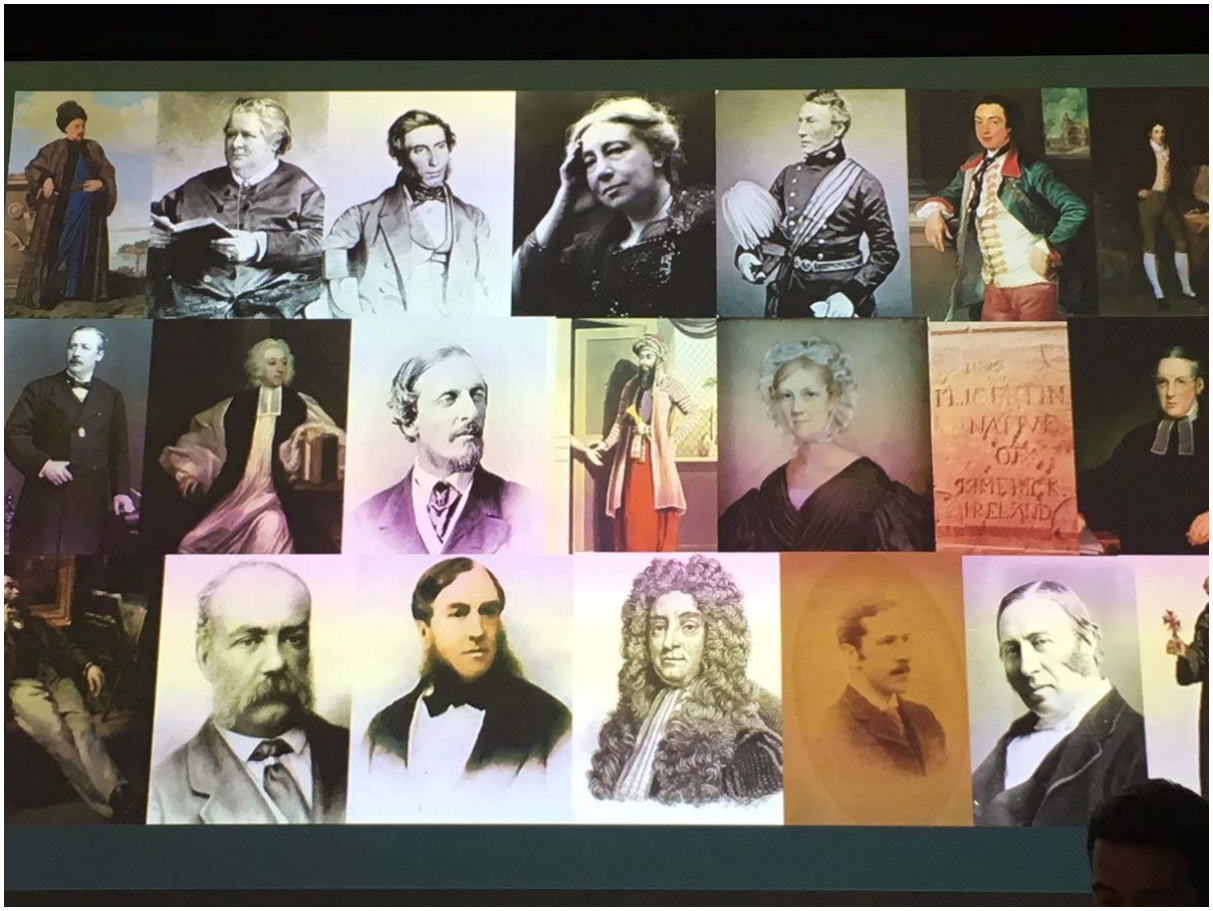
Nickianne Moody's paper on girls' comics tied back to the nineteenth-century material addressed by other speakers earlier in the day. Moody demonstrated the origins of certain Egyptian tropes in the nineteenth century, including elements of the phantasmagoria popularised by the likes of Étienne-Gaspard Robert, whose projections were often accompanied by Egyptian iconography and material ('Ægyptiana'). Moody also identified the connection between showmanship and Egypt as embodied by Giovanni Battista Belzoni, whose *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations, in Egypt & Nubia* (1820) presents the explorer as a hero penetrating particularly Gothic landscapes. These nineteenth-century elements percolated through into the girls' comics of the 1970s, in which several short-lived but extremely popular comics appropriated Egyptian themes for their stories focussing on horror, mystery and the supernatural. Moody examined DC Thomson's *Spellbound* (1976-1977) and Fleetway's *Misty* (1978-1979), considering in particular the use of the Egyptian priestess as symbolic of feminine power.




Source: Charlotte Coull

**Panel 4: Egypt in the British Isles**

Emmet Jackson's paper examined the reception and modern cultural imagination of ancient Egypt in Ireland during the long nineteenth century. Though Ireland's interactions with Egypt and its exposure to ancient Egypt were not as substantial as that experienced in Britain, these influences nonetheless exist, and their documentation adds to the overall picture of the 'western' imagining of ancient Egypt. Jackson began by examining the travel narratives of various members of the Irish elite, such as Lady Harriet Kavanagh, Sir William Wilde and Lord Belmore, then documented examples of Irish Egyptianising pyramids and architecture, for example the Grand Arch Room in Dublin. Jackson concluded by positioning nineteenth-century Egyptomania in relation to the development of a burgeoning Irish cultural nationalism, focusing on the Celtic revival and its representation of an ancient Irish race connected to non-western races, specifically that of ancient Egypt.



Source: Dan Potter

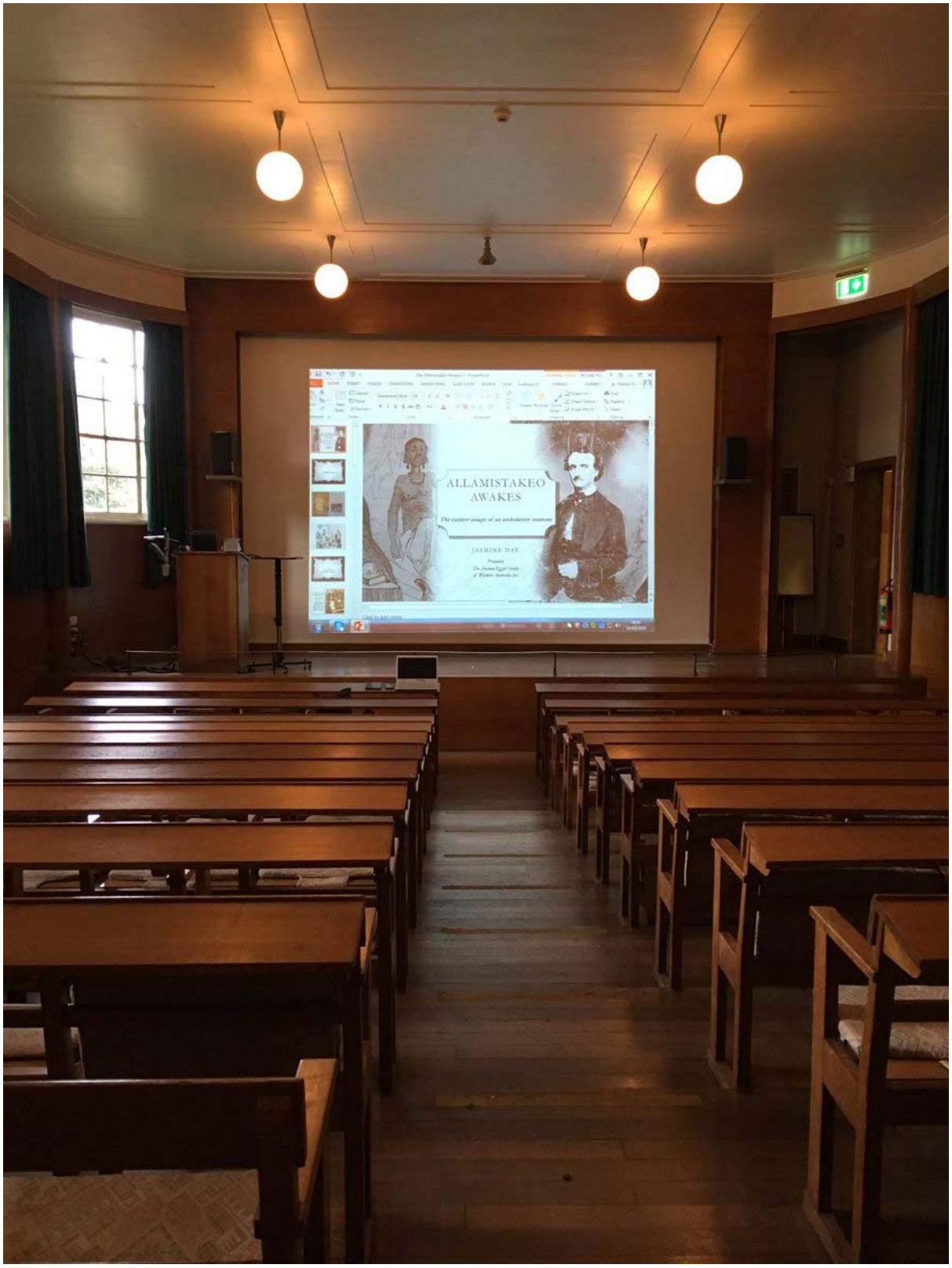
Martyn Barber's paper discussed the hyperdiffusionist theories of Grafton Elliot Smith and WJ Perry, which envisioned ancient Egypt as the sole source of archaic civilization, and saw the 'children of the sun' as the carriers of that civilization across the known world. As popularized by the likes of HC Massingham from the mid-1920s, the megaliths and monuments of prehistoric 'Wessex' – Stonehenge, Avebury and Silbury Hill among them – were, according to some, built by Egyptian immigrants. The impact of Massingham's efforts was felt far beyond archaeology, but ironically happened as hyperdiffusionism was, academically, in serious decline. Barber noted a curious, and seemingly related, occurrence in 1930 – the discovery of a genuine Egyptian scarab only a few hundred yards from Stonehenge – and probed the mythology that emerged surrounding this remarkable artefact.


"Let sleeping scarabs alone"
- When Egypt came to Stonehenge

Source: Tea with the Sphinx

**Panel 5: Mummies**

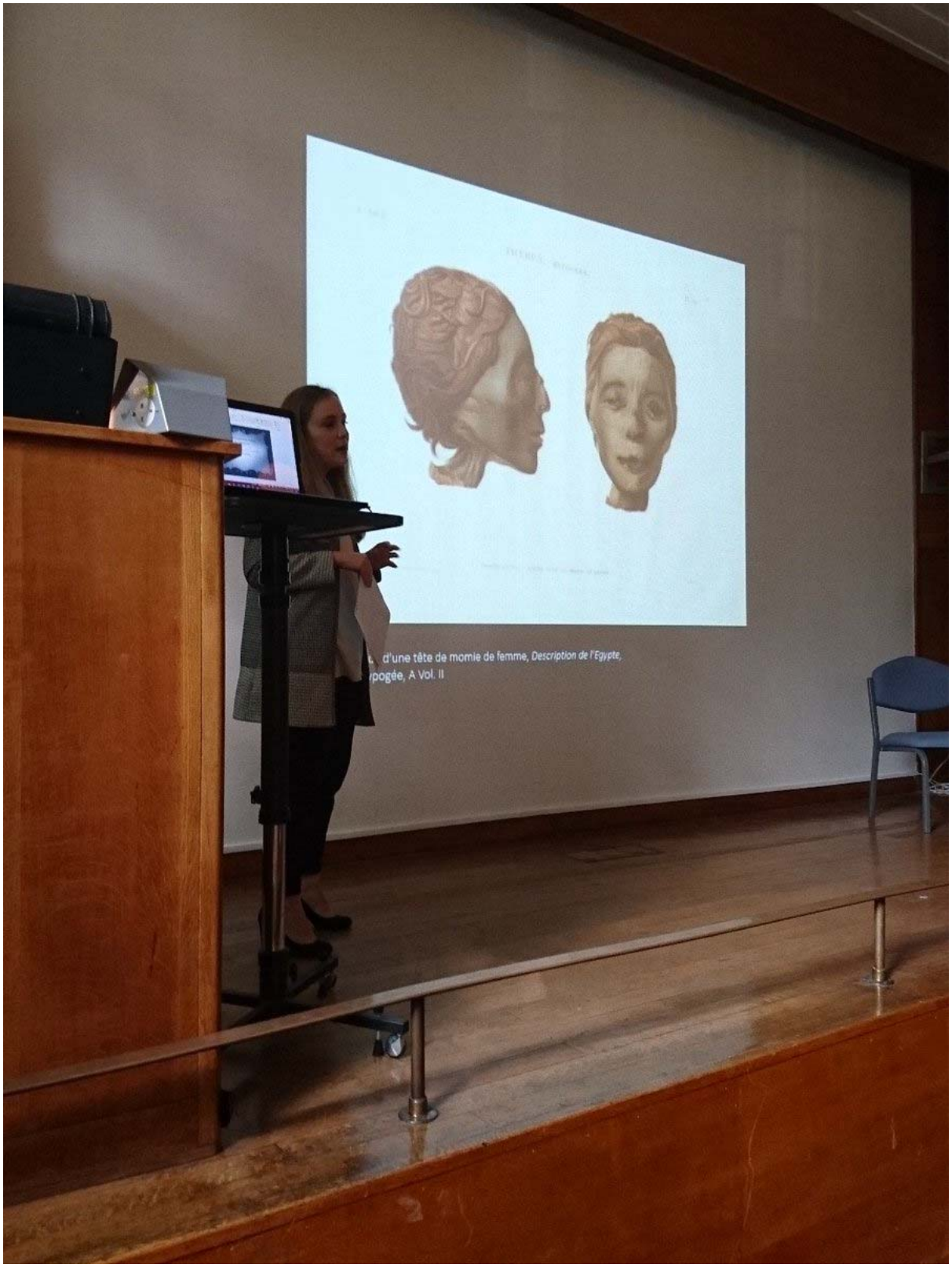
The second day of the conference began with a panel on mummies. Speaking via Skype from Western Australia, Jasmine Day showed delegates a recently discovered British illustration for Edgar Allan Poe's satirical short story 'Some Words With a Mummy' (1845) in one of the author's first posthumously published anthologies (1852): this image is the earliest known visual depiction of a living Egyptian mummy, a character that later became an archetypal figure in Victorian literature and twentieth-century cinema. Day situated the unknown artist's vision of the fictional mummy Allamistakeo within the history of visual and literary depictions of mummies and the socio-political discourses they articulated. The artist, Day claimed, elaborated upon Poe's text to invoke additional, possibly racial ideas.




Source: Angela Stienne

Angela Stienne's paper explored the transformation of Egyptian mummies from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries at the hands of individuals who shaped and transformed the mummy's materiality and reception. Stienne investigated groups of individuals

with common backgrounds in the medical and natural sciences who physically engaged with the mummy in the form of medical dissections, autopsies and private and public unrollings. Her analysis incorporated individuals to whom delegates were introduced on the first day of the conference, such as Thomas Pettigrew. Through the development of a typology of mummy engagements, Stienne's paper reframed the study of Egyptian mummies at this crucial period of intellectual, cultural, political and institutional change.

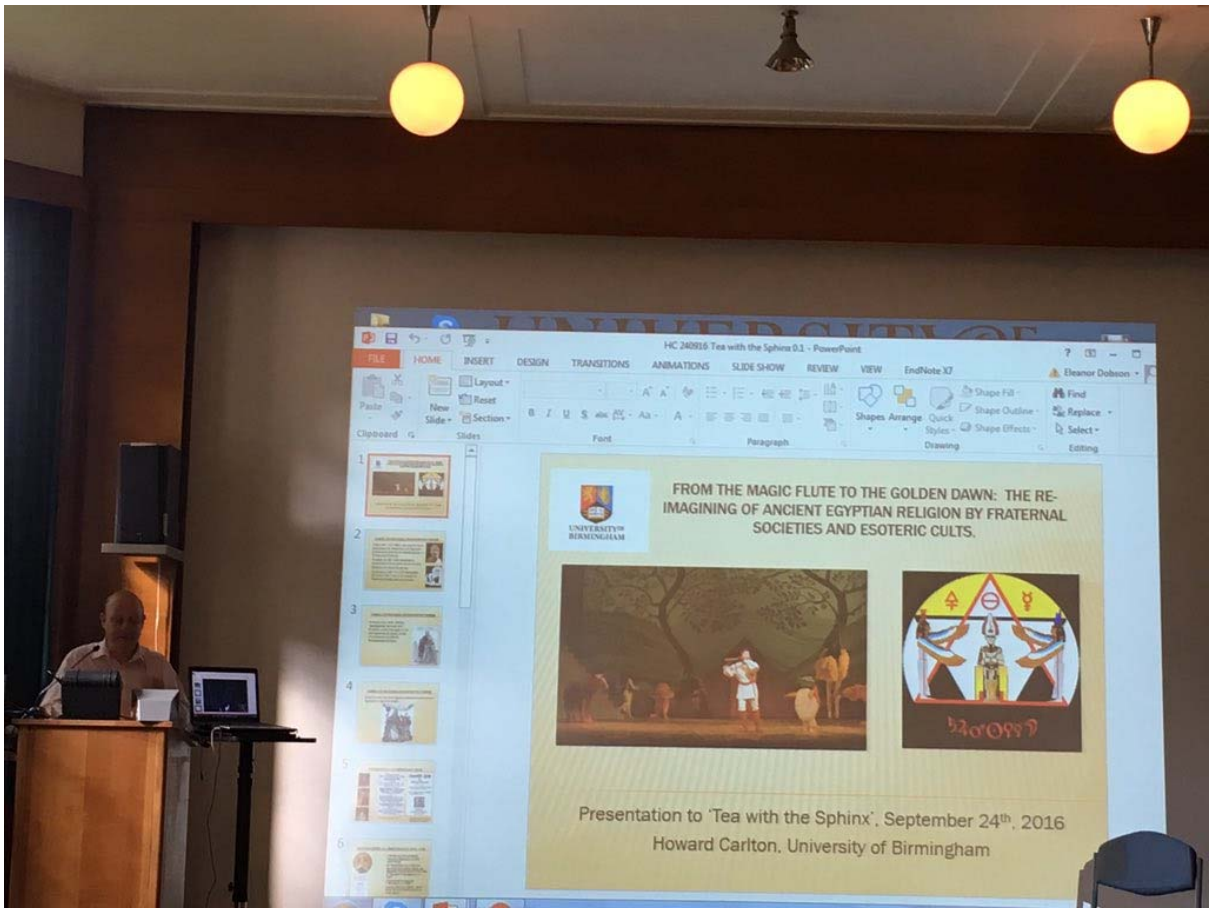



Source: Tea with the Sphinx

**Panel 6: Religion**

Howard Carlton spoke on a number of pseudo-Masonic rites which were developed on the basis of somewhat tenuous connections with ancient Egyptian rituals and supposedly recovered

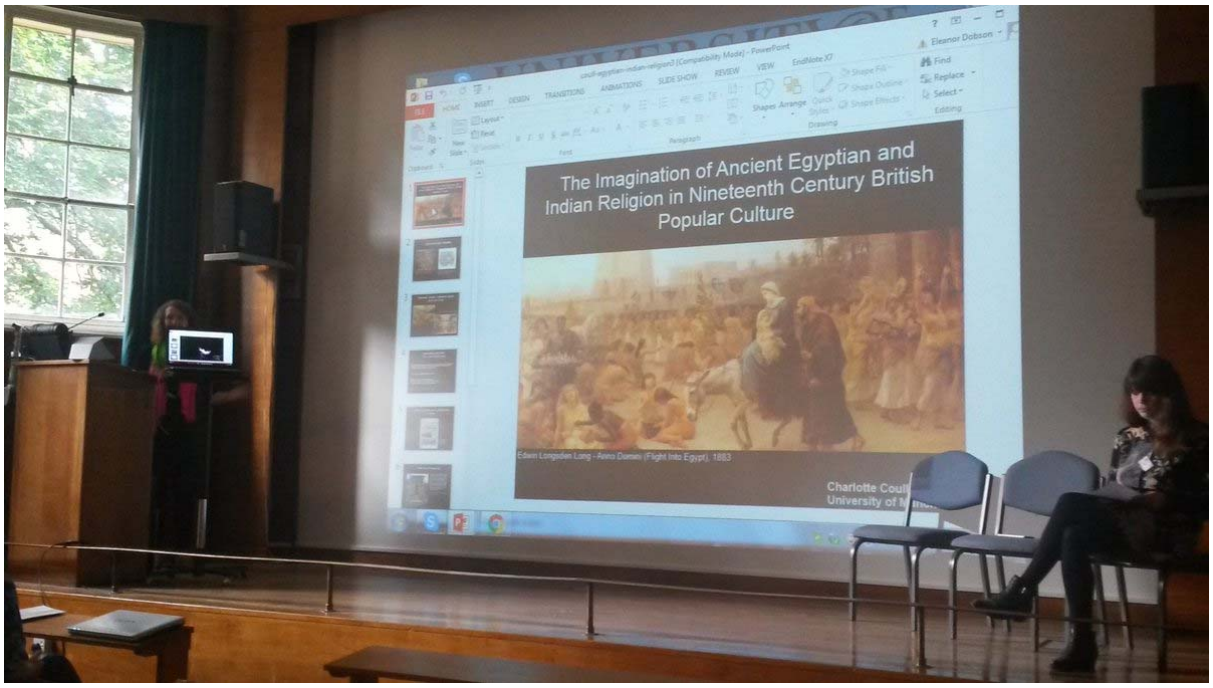
esoteric knowledge, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. Early versions of the connection can be seen, Carlton demonstrated, in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* (1791) and the mysterious, or possibly counterfeit, form of 'Count Cagliostro' and his 'Rite of Egyptian Freemasonry'. Carlton's presentation explored the genesis of this phenomenon and sought to interrogate the reasons why the mythology and mysteries of ancient Egypt proved to be of such great and abiding interest to would be 'seekers after the truth' in both Europe and America.




Source: Angela Stienne

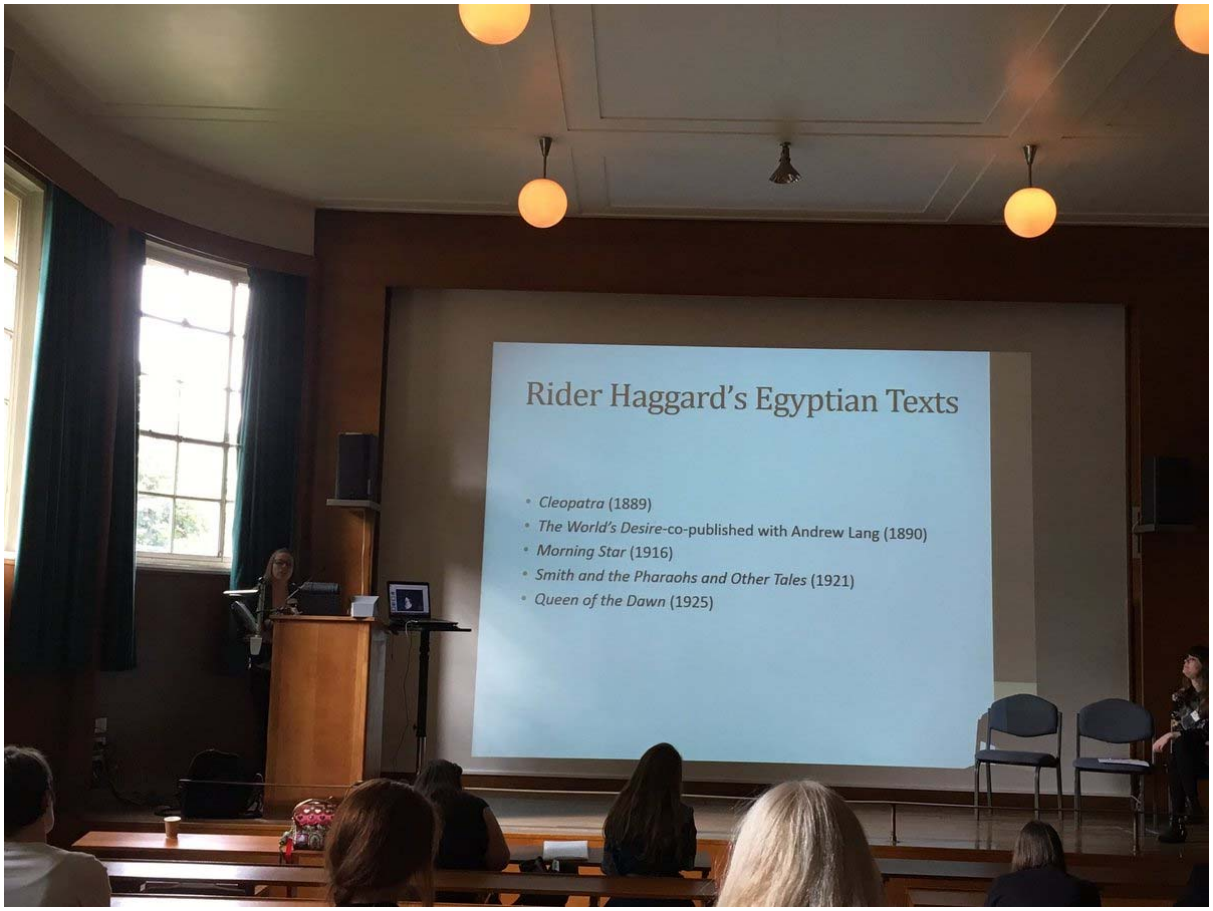
Charlotte Coull examined the nineteenth-century response to the gradual influx of information about foreign religions, demonstrating how the British image of religion from both Egypt and India was fundamentally influenced by an attempt to overlay foreign belief systems with Christian theological structures. In the British imagination, these religions represented both the unknown and exotic, but also, concurrently, the reassuringly Christian and familiar. Coull examined the differences in how popular Christianity merged with nineteenth-century concepts of ancient Egyptian and Indian religions, including literary constructions alongside the display of archaeological material in museums, and scrutinised the dichotomy between the place of contemporary Egypt as the landscape with the archaeological potential to prove the veracity of the Bible, and later literary representations of ancient Egyptian religion as mysterious and dangerous, illustrated by the growth in Egyptian-themed Gothic fiction from the 1882 British invasion. Coull compared this with how Buddhism became a fashionable presence in British middle- and upper-class culture from the late 1870s, once again in literature as a mysterious

Eastern religion, for example in Edwin Arnold's 1879 *The Light of Asia*, but also in scholarship as claimed historical biographies of the Buddha became popular reading material.




Source: Alice Baddeley

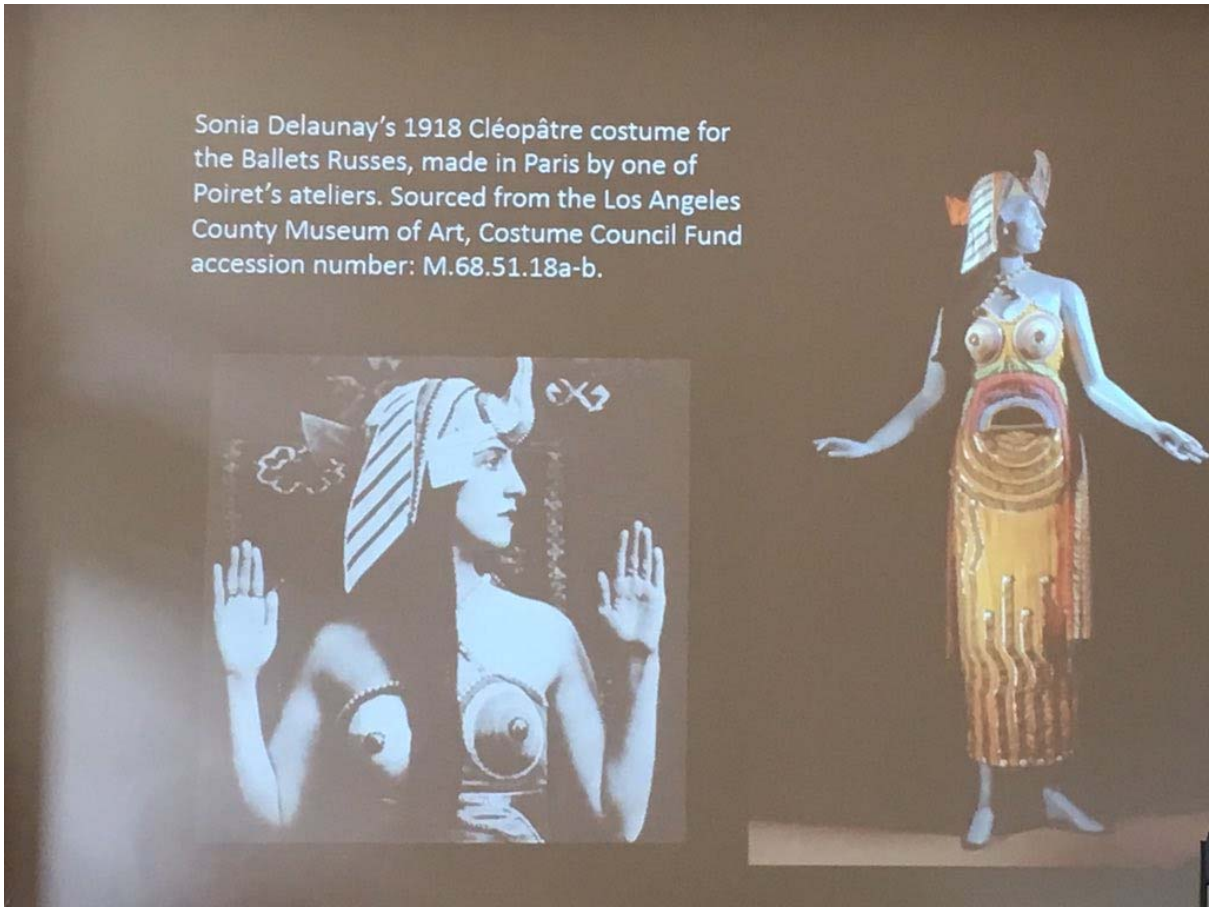
Sara Brio explored the effects of Victorian Egyptomania on nineteenth-century Christianity, examining the connection between the rapid influx of print material and growing doubt surrounding the idea of the Christian afterlife, and arguing that the Victorians sought to understand and redefine Christianity by examining its relationship and connectedness to ancient Egyptian religion and vice versa. Specifically, Brio presented a typological reading of H. Rider Haggard's *Cleopatra* (1889), arguing that the novel is both a microcosm of shifting Victorian attitudes towards Christianity and representative of Haggard's personal struggle with traditional Protestantism. The nuanced combination of a typological dialogue and Egyptian motif, Brio claimed, allowed Rider Haggard to address such topics as the value and implications of Christ's death as substitutionary atonement, the origins of Christianity, and the inherent fear and doubt surrounding the extent of a Christian's security in eternal life after death.




Source: Angela Stienne

**Panel 7: Archaeology**

In her paper Mara Gold explored the practice and reception of Egyptian archaeology and the concepts of femininity and feminism during the early twentieth century. Gold demonstrated how discoveries including the excavations of Hatshepsut's mortuary temple during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the Egypt Exploration Society and the busts of Nefertiti found in 1912 and 1933, led to both of these monarchs becoming symbols of beauty and feminism. Meanwhile, she commented upon the contemporary success achieved by female professionals in Egyptian archaeology that largely stemmed from their femininity and gender-specific practices: their perceived innate qualities of detailed observation allowed them to explore avenues of Egyptian archaeology ignored by their male counterparts.




Source: Angela Stienne

Gabrielle Heffernan's paper discussed the replicas of Tutankhamun's tomb and its funerary ornaments at an exhibition in Wembley in 1924, only two years after the tomb's discovery by Howard Carter. The replicas were created by the sculptor William Aumonier under the guidance of Egyptologist Arthur Weigall. The exhibition drew huge crowds in its first incarnation at Wembley and the replicas have continued to inspire audiences until the present day, in their current home at Hull Museums. How, Heffernan asked, did the replicas fit in with the growing popular appeal of ancient Egypt? This question stimulated an engaging discussion of replicas' appeal to museum visitors – can these objects be seen as authentic, and what is their relationship to the original artefacts?


Source: Angela Stienne

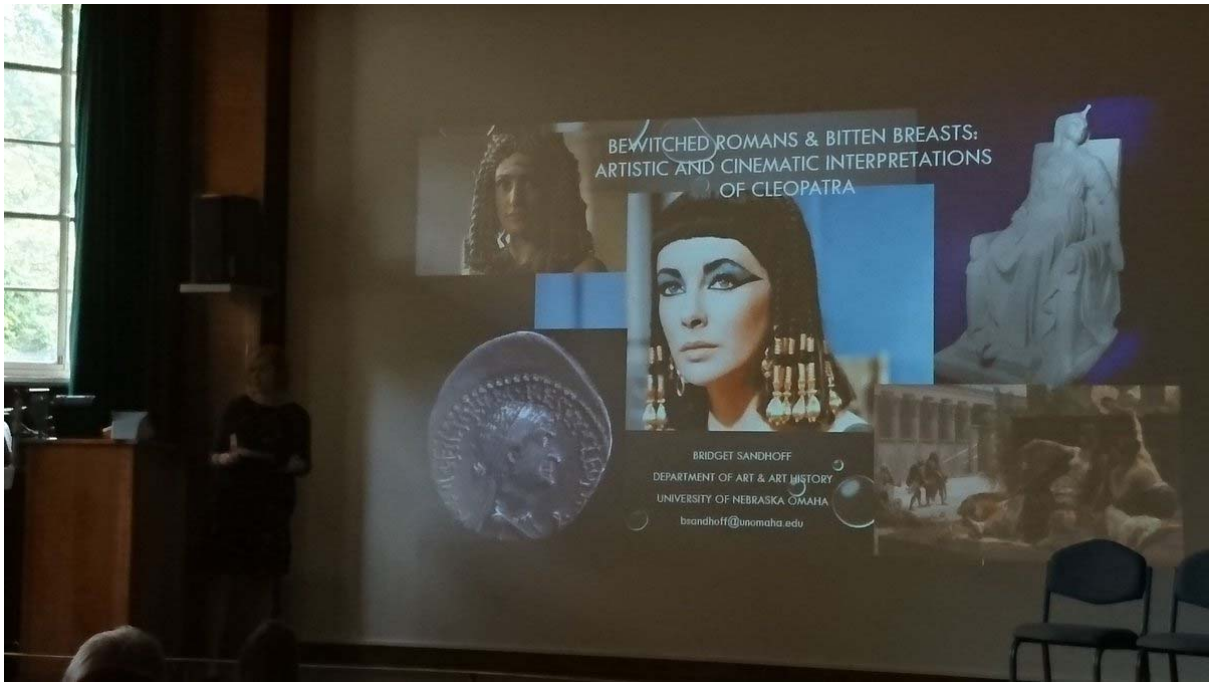
**Panel 8: Cleopatra**

The final panel of the conference explored representations of Cleopatra VII Thea Neotera Philopater. Chloe Owen opened this panel by exploring the representations of ancient Egypt in William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and across subsequent productions of this play. Owen engaged first with Shakespeare's use of language to depict the civilisation, demonstrating Egypt's definition as a feminised space in contrast to the masculine world of the Romans. Considering both the directors' engagement with Shakespeare as a playwright and, more specifically, with the country itself, Owen illustrated the changing attitudes towards Egypt from the seventeenth through to the twenty-first century. Engaging particularly with ideas of gender and race theory. Owen discussed the dominance of white British actresses in the role of Cleopatra (Eve Best and Elizabeth Taylor, for example), and explored how the play is changed when the queen is played by a black actress.

Source: Tea with the Sphinx

Bridget Sandhoff noted that Cleopatra is one of the most misunderstood but widely-known historical figures; few authentic facts survive about her life, and those facts that do survive provide contradictory reports about the last Ptolemaic ruler. In Egypt, she was a beloved savior

and goddess, but the Romans vilified her as a wanton seductress. Sandhoff demonstrated that Roman writings dominate history and have tainted Cleopatra's visual legacy for centuries, exploring the myth of Cleopatra promulgated by the Romans, especially Augustan invective, which has served as the source for most visual depictions of the Egyptian queen. Through analysing how Roman notions of Cleopatra have been used over time, paying particular attention to nineteenth-century works of art by the French painter Alexandre Cabanel and the American sculptor Edmonia Lewis, Sandhoff proposed that twentieth-century depictions (for example, in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* [1963] and the HBO series *Rome* [2005-2007]) take a more balanced view of Cleopatra than any century prior. They do, however, fall victim to the Roman characterisation of her as a sexually voracious queen, who seduces anyone for her own gain.




Source: Tea with the Sphinx

Siv Jansson discussed the filmic portrayal of Egypt in 20th-Century Fox's *Cleopatra* (1963) as well as the 'celebrification' of the two main characters, who were overshadowed by the notoriety of their actors; as *Vanity Fair* observes, 'this was the film that gave us Liz and Dick'. Jansson noted how the film's scheduling issues, location problems, spiralling production costs, and its running time (over 3 hours), marked the over-indulgence - or over-anxiety - of the producers, observing that watching it now, the depiction of Egypt is stunning, lurid, and absolutely a product of its time and context: Mark Antony and Cleopatra, she claimed, are glamourous celebrities, not historical characters.


Source: Gabrielle Heffernan

**Close: David Gange**

The conference was closed by David Gange, whose monograph *Dialogues with the Dead: Egyptology in British Culture and Religion, 1822-1922* addresses the close intertwinement of religion and Egyptology from the early nineteenth century to the opening decades of the twentieth. Gange emphasised the interdisciplinary importance of the event, which brought together scholars from history, art history, literary studies, Egyptology, archaeology and museum studies. Sharing methodologies and disciplinary insights had been one of the highlights of the conference, as well as the identification of overlaps between approaches that came to light. What the conference has surely demonstrated is a burgeoning scholarly interest in the reception of ancient Egypt across disciplines, which, if it is encouraged and nurtured, will succeed in uniting these fields in a truly interdisciplinary manner. It is through this kind of collaboration that we might carve out and define a new field.

For more on 'Tea with the Sphinx', visit the conference Twitter account, Storify, Emmet Jackson's blog 'Irish Egyptology', or the Histories of Archaeology Network website, where a series of blog posts detailing the conference are being uploaded over the coming weeks.