

**Report of 15 June 2017**  
**Royal Society**  
**Southern Highlands Branch**

**Speaker:** Dr Michael Birrell

**Topic:** Luxor Temple: The Southern Harem of Amun

Dr Michael Birrell obtained his BA(Hons) in Archaeology at Sydney University in 1988, receiving an MA (1992) and a PhD (1999) in Egyptology from Macquarie University. Michael has worked on numerous archeological excavations in both Egypt and Israel, and has travelled widely in the Middle East, Asia and Europe. He has research interests in ancient Egyptian religion and government, and is collecting data for a book on New Kingdom temple architecture. For the last 20 years, he has run a travel company called *B.C. Archaeology* which specializes in history and archaeology.

Michael's lecture attracted an audience of fifty who were clearly fascinated by his presentation. Many had accompanied him on previous tours to Egypt and the Luxor Temple which lies in the heart of the modern city of Luxor in southern Egypt. It was the cult place for the worship of the Egyptian god Amun-Re who was the imperial state god during the New Kingdom. The temple holds a remarkable place in history.

Amenhotep III built the main part of the temple which we see today, the structure growing in three main phases. The first phase included the main sanctuaries on the southern end, vestibules and the hypostyle hall. In the second phase, the king added a peristyle 'sun court', then in the third phase he began construction of a large pillared colonnade after the Amarna period of Tutankhamun (1336-1327) BC. The temple of Luxor was intimately connected with the festival of Opet, a religious celebration taking place during the second month of the Inundation and lasting up to 4 weeks. The main event was a procession of the divine images from Karnak to Luxor Temple which is depicted on the walls of the pillared colonnade.

Sety I and Ramesses II added a peristyle court to the front of the building and a massive pylon entrance with obelisks and statues. This construction work has a different orientation to the rest of the temple, since later Pharaohs developed a major procession route between Luxor Temple and Karnak Temple and wanted a flush façade facing the road. The road to Karnak was subsequently refurbished in the 30<sup>th</sup> Dynasty by Nectanebo I (380-363 BC) who lined the way with about 1000 sphinxes on either side.

The main sanctuary of the temple was devastated during the Second Persian invasion (around 340 BC) and was rebuilt in the name of Alexander the Great (320 BC). This Macedonian king equated Amun with his divine father Zeus, and had himself represented there in traditional guise as an Egyptian pharaoh. Michael noted the differences between the two styles of art in this part of the temple! A small chapel to the Graeco-Roman god Serapis was added by Trajan (AD 98-117) to the forecourt.

In the Roman period during the reign of Emperor Diocletian (AD 284-305), the temple precinct was converted into an army camp which was heavily fortified. Then in the medieval period, the town encroached on the ruins of the temple resulting in houses being built against the walls. As the town grew around the temple, a mosque dedicated to the local saint Abu el-Haggag was built in the Ramesside court. It has been retained even though the rest of the domestic structures have been removed.

As for the future, Michael Birrell noted that due to political unrest in the Middle East, tourist numbers have plummeted from 15 million per year to just 800 000. Sad news indeed for Egypt so dependent on tourism to keep alive the history of magnificent structures such as Luxor Temple.

**Anne Wood FRSN**