

Historic Environment – March 2026.

For our March meeting we went further afield than usual. Tim Meacham presented an attempt to make historical sense of Ancient Egypt as represented by the sites and sights of a Nile cruise. Starting with a brief introduction to the unpromising geographical situation of Egypt (97% desert with most development confined to a thin strip running north to south along the Nile valley or along the Red Sea coast) it seemed an unlikely candidate to host the great civilisation which developed between 5000 BC and the Greek and Roman takeovers in the late 1st century BC.



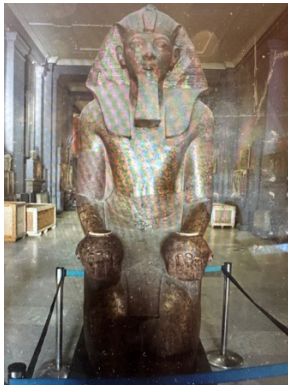
The Eastern Desert (Photo by Tim Meacham)

After early development, the 30 (or 31) dynasties of Ancient Egypt got going with Pharaoh Narmer who in about 3100 BC began to create what was to become a highly bureaucratic system of government in Upper Egypt (the southern half of the country as opposed to Lower Egypt in the north). Things then moved fast under Pharaoh Djoser who died in about 2640 BC but not before having a step pyramid built at Saqqara for his burial. A golden age followed with further social and architectural developments culminating in the two great pyramids at Giza (on the edge of modern Cairo). These formed the tombs of Pharaoh Cheops (also known as Khufu) finished in about 2560, and his son Khafre, who went one better by adding the Sphinx to guard the tombs.



The Sphinx & Pyramid of Cheops at Giza (Photo by Tim Meacham)

Trouble between Upper and Lower Egypt brought a temporary slowdown in progress between 2181 and 2055 BC, but another strong Pharaoh, Mentuhotep II reunited the two kingdoms during his reign of over 50 years up to about 2000 BC. During these years the amazing temple complex at Karnak was started, a symbol of the emergence of Egypt as the leading civilisation in Northern Africa and the Mediterranean. After a short 'dark age' around 1550 BC when the Hyksos, a tribe from the Levant, seem to have controlled Egypt, the 'New Kingdom' (established by Pharaoh Amose 1) brought about the greatest phase of her history in the 1300s BC, when such famous characters as Hatshepsut, the female Pharaoh whose statues show her with a beard, Akhenaten, adherent of the secondary sun god Aten who tried to overthrow the existing religious practices, his son Tutankhamun, short-lived but celebrated today for the glory of his tomb offerings in the Valley of the Kings, and the beautiful Nefertiti all led the nation. The Ramesses clan (think of Moses and the Israelites) also had their period of power, but like many great civilisations internal strife again intervened.



Hatshepsut, the bearded Female Pharaoh in Cairo Museum (Photo by Tim Meacham)

It was a slow deterioration with many great temples, Kom Ombo and Philae both visited on the cruise, being late and worthy signs of continuing power, but after the Hellenic conquest of Egypt in 330 BC, led by Alexander the Great, it took only another 200 years for the Romans to put the final nail in the coffin of the 500-year Egyptian supremacy.

Our April talk will be Part 2 of Rob Pearson's account of the Quakers in County Durham. Details from Tim Meacham.