MINISTÈRE DE L'ÉDUCATION NATIONALE, DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR ET DE LA RECHERCHE

BULLETIN
DE L'INSTITUT FRANÇAIS
D'ARCHÉOLOGIE ORIENTALE

en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne

BIFAO 50 (1952), p. 99-105

M. Anis

The First Egyptian Society in London (1741-1743).

Conditions d'utilisation

L'utilisation du contenu de ce site est limitée à un usage personnel et non commercial. Toute autre utilisation du site et de son contenu est soumise à une autorisation préalable de l'éditeur (contact AT ifao.egnet.net). Le copyright est conservé par l'éditeur (Ifao).

Conditions of Use

You may use content in this website only for your personal, noncommercial use. Any further use of this website and its content is forbidden, unless you have obtained prior permission from the publisher (contact AT ifao.egnet.net). The copyright is retained by the publisher (Ifao).

Dernières publications

9782724711264	*La chapelle d'Osiris Ounnefer Neb-djefaou*	Laurent Coulon
9782724711752	*Guide du Caire Islamique*	Hadrien Collet
9782724711660	*Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'études orientales 41*	Adrien Candiard (éd.)
9782724711745	*Bulletin archéologique des Écoles françaises à l'étranger (BAEFE)*	
9782724711271	*Du côté de chez Zeus*	Emmanuel Botte (éd.), Hélène Cuvigny (éd.), Michel Reddé (éd.)
9782724711677	*La Description de l'Égypte*	Paul-Marie Grinevald
9782724711714	*La pensée et la pratique pharmacologiques d'Avicenne*	Sylvie Ayari
9782724711899	*BCAI 40*	

© Institut français d'archéologie orientale - Le Caire

THE FIRST EGYPTIAN SOCIETY IN LONDON

(1741-1743)

BY

M. ANIS (PH. D. B'HAM).

In the Middle Ages, English knowledge of Ancient Egypt was based almost entirely upon the Old Testament, and even when this knowledge was supplemented during the Renaissance, by that gained from early Greek writers, it remained meagre and grossly inaccurate. Neither the accounts of the imaginative travellers of the xvith nor those of the early xviith centuries helped to correct these errors.

The pioneering British antiquarian interest in Egypt was opened in the first half of the xviiith century by the visit of antiquaries and antiquity lovers such as Dr. Shaw, Captain Norden, R. Pococke, Dr. Perry, Lord Charlemont and Lord Sandwich, often without adequate scholarly research. The works of these travellers, however, stimulated an interest already aroused in the study of Egyptian antiquities so much so that an « Egyptian Society » was founded in December, 1741, the purpose of which was « the promoting and preserving Egyptian and other ancient learning ». The Society had its origin (as so many other societies have had) in a dinner [1]. This was held at the Lebeck's Head, Chandos Street, Charing Cross, on December 11th, 1741, (The Feast of Isis). Lord Sandwich, Captain Norden, Dr. Pococke, and Dr. Perry were there to found the Society. Lord Sandwich was elected Sheik (President) of the Society. At that first meeting, Charles Stanhope, Martin Folkes, Dr. W. Stukeley, Thomas Dampier and J. Milles were elected members,

[1] W. R. DAWSON, *The First Egyptian Society, The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology,* vol. XXIII, London, 1937, p. 259-260.

BIFAO 50 (1952), p. 99-105 M. Anis
The First Egyptian Society in London (1741-1743).
© IFAO 2026 BIFAO en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

« and being present were immediately admitted » : they were likewise « styled founders of the Society » [1].

There are quite a few references to the Egyptian Society (sometimes mistakenly called Egyptian Club) [2]. Some details of its history are contained in a letter from Stukeley to Maurice Johnson, published by T. J. Pettigrew in his paper on *The Spalding Society of Gentlemen* in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* [3], another reference occurs in Stukeley's *Medallic History of Carausius* [4] (1757-1759), and others in *The Family Memoirs* of the Rev. W. Stukeley [5], (Durham 1882), in John Nichols', *Literary Anecdotes of the XVIIIth century* [6], 1812, in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (under R. Pococke, A. Gordon and J. Milles) and in Wilson's biography of Alexander Gordon, Toronto, 1873 [7] Mr. W. R. Dawson also wrote a short account of the Society in the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* [8].

The *Journal* of the « Egyptian Society » is extant in manuscript form [9]. In it are recorded the minutes of the Society and drawings of some of the Egyptian and other ancient antiquities in its possession. The manuscript does not appear to have been consulted before, for the history of the Society has not hitherto been studied in detail. In fact Nichols was probably responsible for the mistakes which were repeated after him notably by the authors of the *D.N.B.*, and also by D. Wilson and even W. Dawson. Nichols,

[1] T. J. Pettigrew, *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 7 (1852) p. 143-158.

[2] Dawson, *op. cit.*, and *D. N. B.* (R. Pococke).

[3] *Op. cit.*

[4] Preface, VI.

[5] Vol. I, p. 326, Stukeley to R. Gale, 9th February, 1742.

[6] Vol. V, p. 334, et seq.

[7] D. Wilson, *Alexander Gordon, the Antiquary*, p. 23.

[8] *Op. cit.*

[9] The manuscript is in the possession of *Egypt Exploration Society* in London. It is obviously not the *memoirs* taken by Stukeley, and mentioned in his letter to Maurice Johnson, simply because Stukeley was absent during the last few meetings. In 1885 Walter Prideaux wrote to the Editor of *Notes and Queries* (vol. XI, p. 427) asking « can any of your correspondents give me information with respect to the Egyptian Society? I possess the Journal of its transactions... ». From his description of the *Journal* I am convinced it is the one I consulted. He did not mention, however, how he got hold of it, and only said « I have every reason to believe that the volume which I possess came from his (Mr. J. Milles) library ». I could not find the name of the *Journal* in the *Catalogue of his (Milles) library* (B. M. Add. MSS 15, 778). The *Journal* obviously was passed from Prideaux to the newly founded Society.

BIFAO 50 (1952), p. 99-105 M. Anis
The First Egyptian Society in London (1741-1743).
© IFAO 2026 BIFAO en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

Wilson, Dawson and the *D.N.B.*, cite Stukeley as the Secretary of the Society. The *Journal* records that, at the first meeting, « the Society then proceeded to the choice of a Secretary, and unanimously elected the Rev. Mr. Milles ». Milles held his position until 3rd December 1742 when « the Sheik moved that a Reis Effendi (Secretary) be chosen in the place of Mr. Milles who is absent, and Dr. Pococke being proposed it was agreed to ». Pococke's secretaryship continued to the last meeting of the Society. Another misapprehension of Nichols, the *D.N.B.*, and D. Wilson, is their statement that Alexander Gordon succeeded Stukeley as secretary of the Society. As has just been mentioned the only two secretaries of the Society were Milles and Pococke. What is more, Gordon does not seem to be among the names of the members, nor does his name appear among those present at any of the meetings, nor does he appear to have been proposed for membership by any member.

The *Journal* starts [1] by giving a list of the names of the members who had not visited Egypt. This is followed by the signatures of many of the members, and on the next page, appears the drawing of a sistrum, followed by a Latin poem of fifty-two verses composed in honour of the Society by Th. Dampier and read at the meeting of 22nd January 1742, by Milles, the Secretary. Following this come the laws of the Society, the minutes of the meetings and the drawings of ninety-six medals, Egyptian, Roman and Greek.

The laws in their final shape numbered sixteen. They were not all made during the first meeting : some were added at the very last meetings. According to these laws, persons who had been in Egypt could be elected only by the Original Members (The Founders of the Society) and would be admitted immediately [2]. Others who had never visited Egypt were proposed for the next meetings and admitted on obtaining two thirds of the votes of the members present [3]. This voting was subsequently changed to the unanimous suffrage of all the members present, the quorum being fixed at ten [4]. According to the third law, all other affairs of the Society were to be determined by « a majority of voices by Ballot ». The fourth law ruled that the number of the Society should not exceed thirty, except « any person be

[1] The pages are not numbered. — [2] Law 1. — [3] Law 2. — [4] Law 11.

BIFAO 50 (1952), p. 99-105 M. Anis
The First Egyptian Society in London (1741-1743).
© IFAO 2026 BIFAO en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

proposed who has been in Egypt», but this was amended by law 15 which declared «the number of the members of this Society who have not been in Egypt shall never exceed thirty». The Society was to celebrate the Feast of Isis (11th December) [1].

The entrance fee was a guinea [2], and there does not seem to have been a yearly subscription. Moreover, a member «usually residing in Town do yearly pay five shillings towards defraying the expense of celebrating the Feast of Isis [3]» and «every member of the Society who goes away before supper do pay half a crown [4]». The place of any member who did not attend one or more of six successive meetings after his election, or of any member who was absent twelve successive meetings «unless out of Town, or for any other reason to be approved of by the Society», was «declared void» [5]. If the President or Secretary were absent from a meeting, the oldest member present officiated as Deputy Sheik and the youngest as Secretary [6]. The sixteenth and last law curiously declared that, «if for the future any member of the Society shall produce three several writings,... the said member shall never be allowed to give in anything more in writing to the society» [7].

The meetings of the Society were held every fortnight, from the first Friday in November, to the first Friday in May [8]. The Society had twenty-two meetings, two of them, the 9th (23rd April, 1742) and the 13th (5th November, 1742), were adjourned. The last recorded meeting of the Society was on 16th April, 1743. The President was given the name of Sheik, and the Secretary—Reis Effendi, the treasurer (Andrew Mitchell) the Hasnedar, the collector of the reckonings (W. F. Fauquier) the Mohausil, and the inspector and examiner of the Egyptian medals (S. Leithieulleur) the Gumrocjee.

There were only four significant papers read in the Society, two by Dr. W. Stukeley and the other two by Dr. Pococke. At the third meeting, the Sheik's staff of office—an Egyptian sistrum—was laid before him, and Stukeley gave a learned dissertation upon it [9]. His conclusion was

[1] Law 6. — [2] Law 12. — [3] Law 6. — [4] Law 13. — [5] Law 10. — [6] Law 8. — [7] It appears that the laws of the Society were not always strictly observed. — [8] Law 5. — [9] Stukeley, *Carausius,* p. VI et seq. The talk is not recorded in the *Journal.*

BIFAO 50 (1952), p. 99-105 M. Anis
The First Egyptian Society in London (1741-1743).
© IFAO 2026 BIFAO en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

that the sistrum was a «rattle» to scare off birds of prey when sacrifices were made. It was on that occasion that Stukeley first made the acquaintance of the Duke of Montague, an acquaintance which ripened into an intimate friendship. The other dissertation of Stukeley was delivered on 11th December 1742 at the celebration of the Society of the Feast of Isis (Winter Solstice) in which he dealt with the origin of the festival in Egypt and other ancient nations, attempting to connect that date with the Druids in Britain [1].

Dr. Pococke's first dissertation was on 22nd January 1742. Lord Sandwich exhibited to the Society a mummified Ibis and Dr. Pococke gave his talk on Ibis as a sacred bird among the Egyptians. It was in fact a narration of the accounts of that bird by Herodotus and Strabo. Pococke's second dissertation was on the 5th of March (6th meeting). At the end of the previous meeting (19th February 1742) «Dr. Pococke...acquainted the Society, that he had a Mummy, which he proposed to have open'd before the Society if they pleased» and the Society agreed «that a committee be appointed for that purpose and that they be desired to meet at his Grace the Duke of Richmond's house...». At the next meeting Thomas Dampier, on behalf of the committee, gave the Society a detailed description of the coffin and the mummy, after which Dr. Pococke proceeded with a very interesting talk on the methods of making coffins and embalming in ancient Egypt. Again he seems to have faithfully followed the accounts of Herodotus on that particular point, but supported Herodotus by his own observations in Egypt [2]. Apart from these four dissertations, members of the Society actually did no more than presenting some of their curiosities; the most generous contributors were the President, Norden, Pococke and W. Leithieullleur. Strangely enough, one of the problems that confronted the Society was finance. Money was needed for making engravings and drawings of the medals in the Society's possession. On 2nd April 1742 (8th meeting), Dr. Pococke showed the design of a copper plate for the series of Egyptian medals proposed to be engraved by the Society, but consideration of this question was deferred in four successive meetings «till the expense of it

[1] This dissertation is in a separate part inside the *Journal*.

[2] Herodotus' account is, however, one of the best on mummification among the Egyptians. See W. R. Dawson and E. Elliot, *Egyptian Mummies,* London, 1924, p. 5 et seq.

BIFAO 50 (1952), p. 99-105 M. Anis
The First Egyptian Society in London (1741-1743).
© IFAO 2026 BIFAO en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

be known». It was not before 28th May 1742 (12th meeting) that the Society could agree to pay L. S. 13-17-0 for the engravings and drawings. Immediately after that the twelfth law was made!

The Egyptian Society was one of the first bodies established at the very outset of the Romantic movement. It fostered archaeological interests but only a few of its members were noted antiquaries. In contrast to W. Stukeley, the eminent antiquarian, and Pococke and Norden who were perhaps better known as travellers than antiquaries, the other members were scientists, statesmen, business men, diplomats, but all were «philo-Aegyptians». That this society was popular is proved by the fact that at every meeting no less than two new members were proposed. This culminated in the law to restrict the number of members. The Earl of Sandwich, President of the Society, is a typical example of the early Romantics. He had been in the Levant and Egypt, and appears to have been fascinated by the life of the Arabs. From Dr. W. Stukeley we learn that when he was first introduced to Lord Sandwich he found his «Lord put on the habit of the Arabs inhabiting those oriental countrys, the same as their founder, Ismail's. 'Tis called camissa, a black short gown, with open sleeves, loose, a slit on the breast, for convenient putting on, reaching down only to the knees, the body and legs otherwise naked. Many rings of pervet put on the neck, small of the legs, wrists, earrings, noserings»[1]. The constitution of the Society serves to show the muddled conceptions in the minds of the early Romantics with regard to the East. The Society was founded to study Egyptian antiquities, but the President held an Arabic title, and the Secretary, the treasurer, the examiner of the medals and the collector of money held Turkish or Persian titles.

The circumstances in which the Society dispersed are somewhat obscure. Dr. Stukeley enthusiastically stated in 1750 that «the famous Egyptian Society... flourished extremely for the first three years»[2]. This is open to question at least as far as the last year is concerned. In that year the President was absent from three meetings out of seven. The Society started this last year by seven members attending the first meeting, the second was

[1] Stukeley to Maurice Johnson, *op. cit.* — [2] *Ibid.*

BIFAO 50 (1952), p. 99-105 M. Anis
The First Egyptian Society in London (1741-1743).
© IFAO 2026 BIFAO en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

attended by nine, the third by ten, the fourth by thirteen, the fifth by ten, the sixth by five, and the last by ten. No research was done during the year and the meetings were very short. All this together with the fact that Dr. Stukeley himself did not attend the last six meetings may account for his inaccuracy.

It is possible that some members joined the Society for personal profit, for curiously enough, Dr. Perry, who was one of the founders and a friend of Lord Sandwich [1], moved as early as 28th May 1742, that a law be made to « oblige every member of the Society to purchase one copy of every book which either has or shall hereafter be published by any member of this Society »... « After debate », the Society « ordered that the consideration of this law be postponed to the next winter ». Dr. Perry, however, was no less dogged in pursuing his motion during the next winter. On the 3rd December 1742 he put his motion amended only by this phrase « if the book be approved of » by the Society. This motion was not passed, « nine were against it, and only two were for it ». On 21st January, 18th February, and the 18th March, Dr. Perry again put his motion but was defeated on every occasion. That Dr. Perry had apparently been working for personal benefit is borne out by the fact that the Society, immediately after the last defeat of his motion, that is at the last meeting but two, probably as a special favour to him, announced that it be recommended to every member of the Society to purchase « Dr. Perry's Book of Physics ». At the last meeting, however, Dr. Perry was apparently trying to secure a revision of the question of purchasing the books, but he was faced with the 16th law. He moved « that the 16th law do stand in force only to the first day of November next, which passed in the negative » and the Society unanimously decided that the motion which « was delivered in writing be burnt » : this decision was « accordingly executed » [2]. Dr. Stukeley in his letter to Maurice Johnson, referring to the dissolution of the Society, made what may be a cryptic allusion to Dr. Perry, by averring that « I suppose, when ambition seizes the minds of mortal men, literature flies of course » [3].

[1] Perry, *A view of the Levant*... etc., London, 1743, Preface. — [2] With this sentence ends the *Journal* of the Egyptian Society. — [3] *Op. cit.*

BIFAO 50 (1952), p. 99-105 M. Anis
The First Egyptian Society in London (1741-1743).
© IFAO 2026 BIFAO en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net