

Essex Egyptology Group – July 2024 – Meeting report

The Theban Cemetery before the New Kingdom with Dr Wolfram Grajetzki

In July we were very pleased to welcome Dr Wolfram Grajetzki who gave us a thorough and very detailed survey of the remains in Thebes which pre-date the New Kingdom. There are very few substantial remains because Thebes was often the capital of Egypt or an important town so subsequent populations re-used building materials from earlier monuments or built over them. Wolfram gave Rome and Constantinople as examples of similar situations where the fact that Rome was not important during medieval times means that much remains of its earlier structures whereas Constantinople became an important Christian centre resulting in the loss of earlier buildings.

The earliest settlement in Thebes is underneath Karnak temple so the earliest necropolis is directly opposite the temple across the river in the El Tarif area where there are simple mastaba tombs from the third and fourth dynasties. There are rock cut tombs from the sixth dynasty such as TT413 at Alkhoka which is close to the Ramasseum. It is the tomb of Unas-Ankh whose titles are clearly stated: overseer of Upper Egypt and overseer of the two granaries. These tombs have lots of scenes of farming, provisions, boats and offerings. A similar tomb in the area, that of Ihy, shows musicians. Unfortunately, none of these tombs is open to the public.

During the First Intermediate period (2200-2000 BCE) Thebes became a local administrative centre during a time of chaos. A huge cemetery from this time back in the El Tarif area was recorded in the 1970s. The rock cut tombs had stelae rather than paintings. These stelae had been looted in the nineteenth century and distributed around the museums of Europe so it is impossible to re-unite the tombs with the names of the people buried in them. Three larger tombs, however, are more distinctive and belong to kings of the eleventh dynasty in the period before the reunification of Egypt and the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. The tombs have pillars and are known as saff tombs after the Arabic word for a pillar. The three owners of these tombs were Intef

the first, second and third. Identification of which tomb belonged to which Intef was made possible by the dating of pottery.



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The funerary temple of Montuhotep II at Deir el Bahari marks a considerable increase in construction at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. The remains of its rows of pillars are clearly visible but there is debate about whether it was topped with a small pyramid.

Wolfram explored the many features of this temple including the 'fake' tomb at the front, the royal burial at the back and the chapels of the queens inside. Many of his courtiers were buried nearby including treasurer Khety whose tomb includes the first known representation of a king in the tomb of a noble. The variable quality of the art in these tombs shows that not all the nobles could afford the best artists.

Moving south of Deir el Bahari we come to the tomb Meketre who was treasurer during the time of the Middle Kingdom kings Montuhotep II and III and possibly Amenemhat I. The tomb contained many models of daily life which show cattle being counted, a granary, a house with a garden and boats. One scene even shows one official beating another as a punishment.



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=60935083>

During the twelfth dynasty Egypt's capital was moved to Memphis in the north so there are very few remnants of this period. One survival is the rare tomb of a woman. Senet was the mother of a Vizier so possibly the tomb was built for the Vizier before the court moved northwards. He was buried at Memphis so the tomb in Thebes was used for his mother.

There is evidence of the living as well as the dead. Under Karnak temple there is evidence of Middle Kingdom columned halls with columns bearing the name of Intef II. Statues of Mentuhotep, treasurer to the twelfth dynasty king, Senusret I, have been found at Karnak showing him as a scribe with the title, Overseer of the Royal Works. Also Senusret's White Chapel was discovered broken up inside the third pylon at Karnak.

In the Late Middle Kingdom (1800 to 1650 BCE) when Egypt conquered Nubia and therefore needed a second capital city closer to Nubia than Memphis, Thebes again became a place of royal residence and Karnak temple was also enlarged. In the thirteenth dynasty Papyrus records of this were discovered in the tomb of the thirteenth dynasty scribe Neferhotep at Dra Abu el-Naga. Another burial from this period is that of a woman, Geheset, whose coffin records the fact that it was a gift from her husband.

Lastly there are royal tombs of the seventeenth dynasty in the Second Intermediate Period. The collapsed pyramid of Nubkheperre Intef's tomb was recently identified at Dra Abu el-Naga. Earlier explorers had removed the coffin which was purchased by the British Museum.

Wolfram gave us a 'monumental' and lavishly illustrated survey of so many unfamiliar tombs and structures as well as showing us how the better known ones fitted into the timeline of Egyptian history.

Alison Woollard



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