

# Salima Ikram

---

## West Saqqara: Preliminary Zooarchaeological Report, 2000

---

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 12, 127-132

---

2001

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

# PRELIMINARY ZOOARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT, 2000

Salima Ikram

The 2000 season yielded a significant amount of faunal material from a variety of locations. All contexts were funerary, save one, which was possibly ritual. The bones were collected by hand and identified to genus and species whenever possible. Information concerning bone fragmentation, age, side, gnawing, burning, erosion, and fungal activity was also recorded. The aging systems for bones and teeth that were used were I. Silver, A. Grant, and S. Payne.<sup>1)</sup> A total of 403 bones, 223 from the various tombs and 180 from the assemblage in Corridor 1, were examined this season. Some identifications are still pending.

The burial shafts and offering chapels of the Sixth Dynasty contained remains of what appear to be funerary offerings, with occasional intrusive remains of canids (dogs or/and jackals). The majority of remains from the tombs are of cattle (*Bos taurus*, 40 elements, mainly hind leg and skull parts). The age at death of these animals varied between 17 months and over two years of age. Surprisingly few bones were positively identified as coming from other domestic animals: sheep/goat (2) and donkey (*Equus asinus* (1)). Additionally, several fragments of medium and large mammal bones were recovered from the excavated areas.

Pig (*Sus scrofa*) bones were also found in funerary contexts. The pig bones came from three different locations. The first was from near the entrance of Corridor 2, where the distal end and shaft fragment of a tibia, was found. The epiphysis was unfused, suggesting that the age at death of the animal was under two years. The second deposit of pig bones came from I/F2, Shaft 45, and consisted of the first and second molars of a pig that had achieved at least fourteen months of age prior to its death. The third and last deposit of pig bones came from Shaft 28, and consisted of a fragment of the right scapula of a young pig, not more than two and a half years of age. While the discovery of pig bones in a funerary (albeit disturbed) context might seem strange, these finds are certainly not unique, as pig bones were also recovered during the 1998 season in the area a little to the east of the one that is currently being explored.<sup>2)</sup> At the time of writing it is unclear whether these deposits are primary or secondary. If they are primary, then one must re-evaluate the position of pork in the ancient diet. It is possible that although pork was probably not offered as part of the funerary feast at the time of burial, it might have been an acceptable and economically feasible

1) A. Grant, "The Use of Tooth Wear as a Guide to the Age of Domestic Ungulates", Ageing and Sexing Animal Bones from Archaeological Sites, in: B. Wilson, C. Grigson, and S. Payne, eds., *BAR British Series* (Oxford 1982); S. Payne, "Kill-off patterns in sheep and goats: the mandibles from Asvan Kale", *Anatolian Studies* 23 (1973), 281-303; I. A. Silver, "The Ageing of Domestic Animals", in: *Science in Archaeology*, eds. D. Brothwell and E. S. Higgs, (London 1963), 283-302.

2) S. Ikram, "West Saqqara: Faunal Remains, Preliminary Report", *PAM X, Reports 1998* (1999), 106.

funerary offering that was left by relatives on subsequent visits to the tomb as it was a cheaper meat than beef.<sup>3)</sup>

Remains of non-domestic animals were also found during the course of the season. The left and right femurs of a mature and as yet unidentified large mammal were also found in I/F3 Shaft 46. From the area of Ptolemaic/Later Period burials, six bird remains also came to light, including two possible galliforms. In corridor 2 and I/F3 Shaft 46, fragments from about four canid mandibles and maxillae were found, belonging to either *C. familiaris* or *C. aureus*, together with some fox teeth (*Vulpes* 10), and the humerus of a mature cat (*Felis catus*). The pectoral spine of a *Synodontis* fish was also found. Thus far, fish bones are unusual in a funerary context, but they are not unknown. A fish bone has been recovered from similar funerary contexts during the course of the 1998 season.<sup>4)</sup>

There is a very unusual layer of flood-borne debris found in Corridor 2 and related chapels, which contains an enormous number (several hundred, if not thousand) of rodent remains (precise identification pending). A similar level has come to light in a Sixth Dynasty shaft at Abu Sir, excavated by the Czech mission in 2000. As yet, it is not clear as to how this deposit was created.<sup>5)</sup>

In conjunction with human burials of the Ptolemaic/Roman period, an east-west oriented burial of an entire lamb (Burial 168, *Ovis aries*) was excavated. Could this be the burial of a beloved pet, or was it a generous food offering? Based on

epiphysial fusion of its long bones and its teeth, one can say that it was approximately aged between five to seven months at death. The bones bore no indication as to the cause of death.

The most striking assemblage from the 2000 mission is a very unusual deposit of bones, possibly ritual, found in the chamber located at the end of Corridor 1 (Figs. 1, 2). The assemblage was arranged in a loose circle, with some disruption caused by bioturbation due to rodents, insects, other animals (canids or foxes?), and rock falling from the ceiling. The majority of bones were all on one level, with some bones being at a slightly lower level (varying between 0.5-2.0 cm) than the others. The assemblage consisted primarily of animal heads and very few other body parts. Some of the bones might not be from a primary deposit, but at this point it is not totally clear as to which bones were intrusive, although it seems as if one, if not more, of the canids was not part of the primary deposit.

The species represented in this group are extremely unusual in funerary or even ritual (e.g. foundation deposits) contexts: catfish (*Clarias*), *Synodontis*, donkey (*Equus asinus*), pig (*Sus scrofa*), hartebeest (*Alcephalis bubalis*), and canid (*Canis familiaris/aureus*). The unifying theme amongst these taxa is their association with wild, chaotic, and Typhonic forces. It is extremely probable that these bones are related to the encased harpoon found in the dirt about 0.7 m below, and its accompanying deposit of Sixth Dynasty pottery.

3) Id., Choice Cuts: Meat Production in Ancient Egypt (Leuven 1995), 29-33, 212-29.

4) Id., West Saqqara, op. cit., 106.

5) A possible hypothesis is that these tombs were the home of several owls, and these rodent remains are the result of their pellets. However, the shaft in Abu Sir that contained a similar deposit does not lend itself as a suitable home for a group of owls.

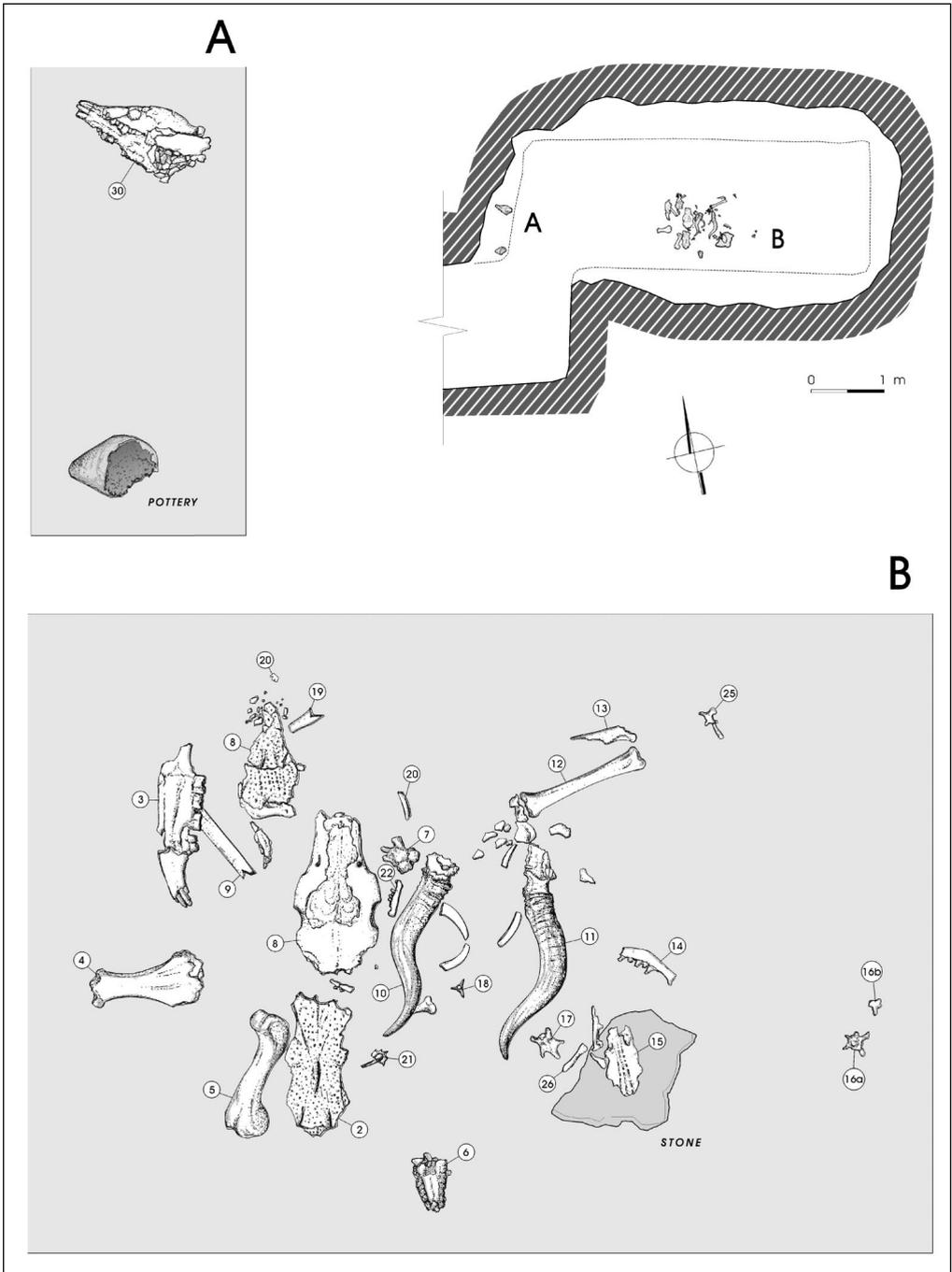


Fig. 1. The bone deposit in Corridor 1  
(Drawing M. Puzkarski)

The most striking aspect of the assemblage was the huge number of fish bones (80). Of the two types of fish identified, *Clarias* and *Synodontis*, the former dominates the assemblage. It was impossible to piece together all the parts of the fish due to the fragile nature of the bones, but there were at least seven catfish placed in the area (calculations based on unique elements, such as pectoral spines and intact portions of crania), and perhaps as many as twelve. At least two *Synodontis* occur in the assemblage. The majority of the bones were from the cranial area; there were few vertebrae and ribs (14) recovered

from the deposit. This suggests that the heads of the fish were severed from the bodies and used as offerings.<sup>6)</sup>

The presence of two pigs (*Sus scrofa*) in the assemblage is also very peculiar. Two crania intact with the maxillae, one belonging to an old pig (the M3 and C were very worn down; the M3 was almost flat), and the other to a young pig (about 25 months old, based on the dentition), were recovered from the deposit. The juvenile animal was part of the circle, while the older beast was found, together with a catfish head, near the entrance of the chamber. It appears that these two



Fig. 2. General view of the assemblage in Corridor 1  
(Photo J. Śliwa)

6) The sizes of the fish are still being calculated. Most of the intact crania were 20 cm or more on average.

elements had been dragged away from the main deposit by some animal. A fragment of a scapula of a young pig and the gnawed remains of what might possibly have been a young pig's limb bone also formed part of the deposit.

A donkey (*Equus asinus*) also formed part of this deposit. An entire skull, with the mandible a short distance away, was placed in a central position in the circle. The nose was pointing in a northerly direction. The animal's dentition suggests that the ass was well under two and half years of age, most probably between a year and half to two years old at the time of its death. The left foreleg of a donkey was also found, although it was not all articulated, as portions, especially epiphyses, had been chewed by carnivores. The left scapula, humerus, radius, ulna, metapodia, and a carpal were all recovered from the area. The aging of these bones<sup>7)</sup> suggests that they belonged to the same individual as the skull. Two vertebrae (centrum unfused) belonging to a large mammal, possibly the donkey, were also found.

The most immediately noticeable and dramatic find from this faunal deposit was the horned skull of a hartebeest (*Alcephalis bubalis*). Not only were the horn cores present, but the keratin sheaths covering these were preserved, albeit damaged and splitting due to dryness. Only the horns and part of the skull of the animal were

present; no portion of the maxilla or mandible were found as part of the assemblage. No other identifiable portion of the animal was found in the deposit, although it is possible that some of the small bone fragments found in the chamber (three) and in the corridor near the entrance (four) might be associated with this animal or the donkey.

A large number of identified bones (thirty, counting teeth in jaws as a unit) came from different canids (*Canis familiaris*/*C. aureus*).<sup>8)</sup> There were at least three individuals present, perhaps four. Two of these were of mature animals,<sup>9)</sup> and just represented by cranial and dentary remains, while the almost complete skeleton of a third was recovered.<sup>10)</sup> Based on dentition and epiphysial fusion, the age of death of the youngest animal was between eleven and fourteen months. Portions of the skeleton belonging to the third and youngest canid were found beneath rock fall. It is possible that the two skulls formed part of the original deposit, and that the younger animal had entered the chamber later on and died as a result of a rock fall or through natural causes. However, as it is not possible to date the rock fall, the skeleton of the young animal might be part of the original deposit. It is difficult to say why only one young complete animal was placed in the deposit; were it a mature animal one could argue that it was a hunting dog.

7) Humerus: proximal fusing, distal fused; radius: proximal fused, distal unfused; ulna: proximal unfused.

8) It is difficult to distinguish between dogs and jackals without more of the skeleton being present.

9) Two almost complete mandibles with teeth, one left and one right (they did not fit together) were recovered. The left measured 61 mm from p1 to m3, while the right measured 67 mm from p1 to m3. A fragment of a third left mandible (i1-c) was also recovered, but due to the fragmentary nature of the bone, it is difficult to determine whether it is a separate animal, or part of the left mandible. Measurements suggest that it is part of a different individual.

10) Mandible and maxilla fragments; atlas and axis; scapula (left); humerus (right and left) proximal unfused, distal fused; radius (left) proximal and distal unfused; and ulna (left) proximal fused; tibia (left) distal unfused, proximal unknown; femur (left) proximal and distal unfused; and five metapodia. Several vertebrae, some ribs, fragments of carpals and tarsals and a few fragmentary limb bones without epiphyses and evidence of gnawing, as well as fragmentation were found and thought to be part of this animal.

A left mandible fragment of a sheep or goat,<sup>11)</sup> containing teeth (d2, d3, and d4) was also found in this deposit. No other positively identified ovicaprid remains have come to light from the assemblage, although it is possible that a shaft fragment from a radius devoid of epiphyses might belong to an ovicaprid, and that some of the fragments of limb bones of medium-sized mammals might also belong to these creatures. It is difficult to tell if these formed part of the original deposit, or were fragments that came in through some other means, such as wash or being dragged in by carnivores.

To the knowledge of this author, this deposit with its strange mixture of taxa is unique. Could it be related to a hunting ritual dedicated to the abolition of Typhonic beings and the establishment and maintenance of maat? Was it related to the burial of a hunter, or is it related to later cult practices associated with the Step Pyramid? These questions are beyond the scope of the present article and will be addressed in a later work once all the taxonomic identifications have been securely established, and a complete study of the archaeological data in conjunction with the zoological study has been made.

11) Differences between sheep and goat are difficult to determine, and for non-European examples it has been found that the criteria outlined by J. Boessneck ("Osteological differences between Sheep and Goats", in: *Science in Archaeology*, D. Brothwell and E. S. Higgs, eds. (London 1963), 331-58 do not always apply. However, S. Payne's ("Morphological distinctions between the mandibular teeth of young sheep *Ovis* and goats *Capra*", *Journal of Archaeological Science* 12 (1985), 139-47) work is helpful in this case. Generally d4s of goats have 'posts', while those of sheep do not. This particular d4 has what looks like the incipient beginnings of a post, but no post. The tooth is slightly worn, suggesting that the 'post' will not be forthcoming, but as its presence is uncertain the identity for this element remains sheep/goat.