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THE NECROPOLIS AT TELL EDFU: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract: An overview of research on the necropolis at Tell Edfu eighty years after discovery.

Keywords: Tell Edfu necropolis, Old Kingdom, First Intermediate Period, Middle Kingdom

Archaeological work at Edfu began in 1858 when Auguste Mariette began to remove debris covering the great temple of Horus. Digging for fertile soil (*sebakh*) on the tell extending to the west of the temple started at the same time. In the decades to come this was to lead to an almost complete disappearance of the mound which had been several meters high. Antiquities from the tell were sold widely by dealers in Edfu and Luxor, yet the fact that the ruins of ancient Djeba (Roman Apollinopolis Magna), as well as the remains of a pharaonic necropolis were hidden under the rubble was recognized only after several decades of digging (Vandier 1981: 55–56).

In 1912 a mastaba belonging to Qar, called Pepi-nefer, the nomarch of Edfu under the reigns of Pepi I and Merenre of the Sixth Dynasty, was discovered by accident.¹ Two years later the Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire (IFAO)

started excavations at Tell Edfu. The French were set on finding Greek and Coptic papyri and limited their work to the upper layers of the mound.² The efforts of Pierre Lacau, who directed the first campaign, and his successors, H. Henne and O. Guéraud, brought excellent results and in 1928 Pierre Jouguet, then Director of the IFAO, wrote: “Edfou a beaucoup donné dans ses couches supérieures. Les couches inférieures du Kôm se présentent moins favorablement” (Jouguet 1928: 267).

In the meantime digging for *sebakh* at the base of the tell uncovered further mastabas and it dawned on the excavators that there was need of regular excavations of the necropolis. The first to start archaeological work and documentation on the Tell Edfu necropolis was Maurice Alliot of the IFAO, who in 1932 excavated a large mastaba (the so-called mastaba of Posener), situated south of the Mammisi, first discovered

¹ For the famous biographical inscription carved on the offering niche, currently in the Cairo Museum, see Daressy 1917; El-Khadragy 2002.

² There is no report from the first campaign (1914), directed by Pierre Lacau. For reports from successive seasons of fieldwork, see Henne 1924; 1925; Guéraud 1929.

as a result of digging for *sebkh* in the 1926/1927 season (Alliot 1933). In 1933 Alliot also excavated the superstructure of the mastaba of Isi, father of Pepi-nefer and his predecessor in the office of nomarch, uncovered accidentally in December 1932 at the base of the main tell (Alliot 1933; 1935; see also Ibrahim 1933: 131–134). It was after that that *sebkh* digging was

finally stopped. In 1937, when excavations at Tell Edfu were resumed by the Franco–Polish mission, both the necropolis and the town were regarded as equally important foci of activity. In fact, the necropolis is known today only from the three seasons of fieldwork carried out by the Franco–Polish mission in 1937–1939 (*Tell Edfou* 1937; 1938–1939; 1950).

THE EARLIEST PHASES

The earliest mastabas discovered so far (see Aksamit 2004) can be dated to the Fifth Dynasty, but there are some clues suggesting that the area south and southwest of the Mammisi could have been used as

a cemetery even in the Predynastic Period. In the vicinity of the said mastaba of Posener, Alliot found some oval brick structures, which he identified as empty predynastic graves. His interpretation

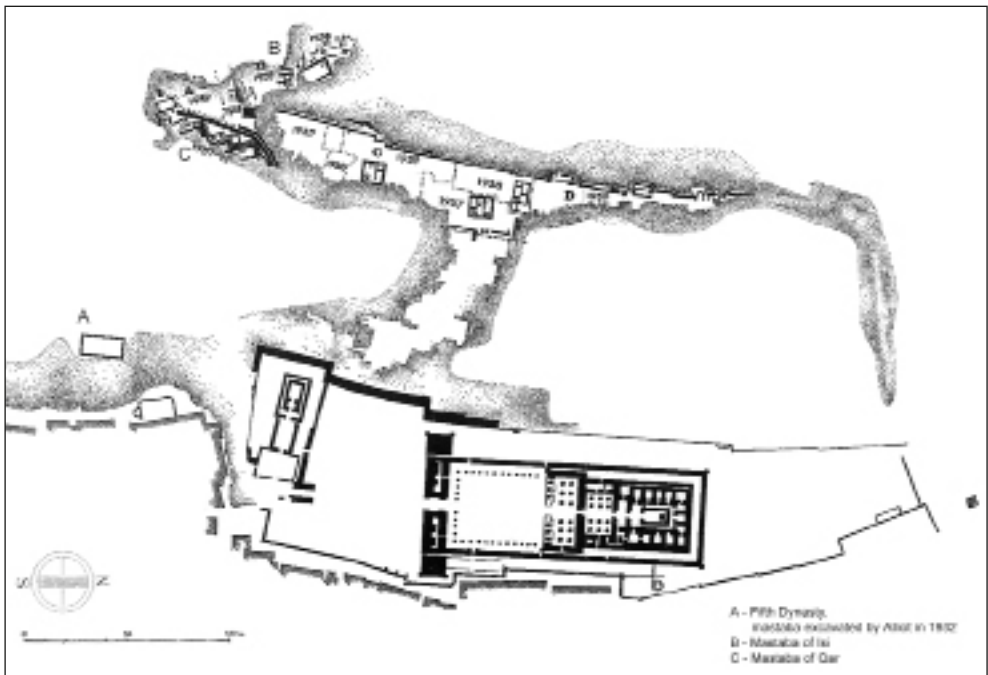


Fig. 1. Plan of Tell Edfu after the third campaign of Franco–Polish excavations (After *Tell Edfou* 1939: Plan 1)

should be treated cautiously, but tombs of undoubtedly Early Dynastic date were discovered in the 1980s by Egyptian archaeologists in the plain not far south of the

tell. A few Predynastic artifacts and some sherds of Early Dynastic schist plates were found also by the Franco–Polish mission in rubbish lying in the area of the necropolis.

EDFU IN THE OLD KINGDOM

Excavations in 1937–1939 discovered or rediscovered numerous mastabas belonging to local officials of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties: besides the already mentioned Isi and his son Qar (M.V), the mission discovered also the burial places of Sabni, Chancellor of the God (M.I), Hor-nakht, General and Chief of Prospectors (*smntjw*) (M.VI) (see Yoyotte 1975), Khoui (M.IV) (see Sainte Fare Garnot 1937), Nefer “Overseer” (M.IX) and many other, anonymous tombs. The superstructures were built of mud brick; stone lining used in the so-called mastaba of Posener being an exception. The richest tombs had also stone false-doors and stelae with relief decoration, while in the other tombs only a vertical ridge in the mud-brick massif served as a substitute for a false-door. The burials were placed in subterranean chambers, but in the larger mastabas there were also burial chambers built in the superstructures. Only in the richest tombs were the deceased provided

with simple stone sarcophagi with little or no decoration; usually the bodies (without traces of mummification) were laid on a reed mat or directly on the ground. Tomb equipment consisted of a fairly uniform set of pottery vessels, but the richer tombs were equipped also with vessels and cosmetic utensils made of copper, as well as stone vases. Some of the vases bore incised decoration and inscriptions with the names of kings Wenis and Teti; they can be counted among the masterpieces of Old Kingdom craftsmanship and were undoubtedly manufactured in the royal workshops in Memphis (Aksamit 2001[2006]). The mastabas, laid out in regular rows, were oriented approximately north–south. The largest tombs were concentrated in the eastern part of the excavated area and in the sector NOI on the western side of the tell, where also the mastaba of Isi was situated. The poorer tombs, without inscriptions as a rule, were located in the southwestern part of the Old Kingdom necropolis.

THE FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD

The use of the necropolis continued into the First Intermediate Period. At some point during that time a town wall was erected across the necropolis. This wall, reinforced several times, became the eastern limit of the necropolis for the centuries to come. Not much in general

was discovered from the times later than the Old Kingdom. In the 1937 report B. Bruyère mentioned some simple burials in pottery coffins, supposedly later than the Old Kingdom, deposited in and between the superstructures of the Old Kingdom mastabas in that area (*Tell Edfou* 1937:

57–58). The mastaba of Nefer (M.IX), also located on the inner side of the wall and dated usually to the First Intermediate Period because of the style of its stela, should rather be connected with the transitional phase between the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period (*Tell Edfou*

1937: 53–56, 58). However, the assertion, that in the First Intermediate Period the necropolis of Edfu was located outside the excavated area, only to return to the area of the Old Kingdom necropolis in the mature Middle Kingdom, calls for reconsideration (Seidlmayer 1990: 40–68).

THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

During the Middle Kingdom the necropolis extended directly outside the town wall. Three main types of tombs can be distinguished:

1. multiple burials in long subterranean corridors with entrances built of mud brick or stone;
2. rectangular mud-brick underground structures with multiple burial chambers arranged on one or two levels;
3. elongated rectangular vaulted chambers built on the surface, grouped in rows next to one another.

Besides, shafts and burial chambers of Old Kingdom mastabas were often reused as family tombs. The mastaba of Isi, somewhat modified and connected with the adjacent mastaba NOI I, was converted into a cult place of the deified nomarch, who was given posthumously the title of vizier. It was in the corridor between the two mastabas that Alliot found several stelae of the inhabitants of Edfu from the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period (Alliot 1935: 19–20, Pls XIV–XIX). It is noteworthy that no stelae were found in any of the tombs of that period, excavated in

1938 and 1939. The findspot of numerous stelae, found during the digging for *sebakh* before the start of regular excavations at the necropolis, poses a problem: did they come from the area of the mastaba of Isi or from some other part of the Middle Kingdom necropolis, completely destroyed by the digging?³ The jewelry of Queen Sobekemsaf of the Seventeenth Dynasty, seen in Luxor in 1895 and said to be found by the *sebakhin* at Edfu (some pieces are currently in the British Museum; *PMV* 1937: 205; recently Russmann (ed.) 2001: No. 84), can indicate that the territory of the necropolis with the richest tombs from that epoch could have been destroyed already in the 19th century. In turn, the part of the Middle Kingdom/ Second Intermediate Period necropolis excavated in 1938 and 1939 seems to belong to the ‘middle class’ of Edfu. Bodies bearing evidence of mummification procedures were buried in simple wooden coffins, sometimes with faces covered by gypsum masks. Beside one tomb (T.XXX), containing a coffin inscribed, among others, with the name of the owner (*Tell Edfou* 1950: 69–70, Cat. No. 1145), all the other tombs

³ According to Engelbach (1922: 113, 132), all 10 stelae he published in 1922, coming from *sebakh* digging at Tell Edfu, including the stela of the parents of Queen Sobekemsaf, were found together in a single spot of unknown location, within a radius of about 25 yards. The stela of King Radjehotep Dedumes, published by Barsanti (1908: 1), was found ‘dans la partie sud du Tell d’Edfou’, but a limestone stela published by Gunn (1929: 5) came allegedly from the northwestern part of the tell.

remained anonymous and the inscribed material recorded from the necropolis included only a few small objects. Pottery and small stone vessels prevailed among the grave equipment, accompanied by cosmetic utensils and jewelry of the simplest kind. Single *shabti* figurines and clay offering trays were deposited in some tombs and several dozen female ‘concubine’ figurines

were scattered in the fill among the tombs. The absence of precious items of any kind, whether faience figurines or anhydrite vessels with relief decoration, present at contemporary cemeteries on other sites, e.g., at Esna and Abydos, should be noted as exceptional, even in the face of evident plundering of some tombs and severe damage of many others by infiltrating water.

END OF THE NECROPOLIS

The latest securely dated tomb at the Tell Edfu necropolis is T.XLVII, located in a natural rock shelter in the corner of an Old Kingdom mastaba M.CII (*Tell Edfou* 1938–1939: Fasc. 2, 197). Up to nine individuals were interred there and, consequently, the equipment presented a mix of Second Intermediate Period and early Eighteenth Dynasty elements. The most noteworthy object among the furnishings is a kohl-pot with a cartouche of the God’s Wife Satamun, undoubtedly the daughter of King Ahmose, rather than the famous princess of Amenhotep III, who never bore the title (*Tell Edfou* 1938–1939: Fasc. 1, 47, Cat. No. 106, Pl. XX, 8, Cairo, Egyptian Museum, JE 68780).⁴ The pottery includes a jar with globular body and short cylindrical neck, painted with horizontal lines, typical of the early Eighteenth Dynasty, and another jar, with ovoid body and short conical neck decorated with horizontal incised lines, of a kind characteristic of the late Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period (*Tell Edfou* 1938–1939: Fasc. 1, 69, Cat. No. 270, Fig. 65 – Warsaw, National Museum, Inv. No. 139105; 65,

Cat. No. 253, Fig. 52 – Warsaw, National Museum, Inv. No. 148282; see also Aksamit 2001[2006]: 22, Fig. 7 and page 24). Other tombs, containing vessels dated by Teodozja Rzeuska to the Eighteenth Dynasty, belong in fact to the same horizon (Rzeuska 1999: 59–71).

It seems that the evidence is insufficient to support Rzeuska’s opinion that the necropolis at Tell Edfu remained in use well into the Eighteenth Dynasty (Rzeuska 1999; also 1997). The question remains, however, what was the function of that area following the earliest phase of the New Kingdom. In 1937, after the first of the three campaigns, Bruyère observed that there were no traces of settlement between the Old Kingdom necropolis and the Jewish quarter of the Ptolemaic town at the southern end of the tell, and that the houses of the Ptolemaic era were built on a thick layer of domestic rubbish (*Tell Edfou* 1937: 22). In the years that followed his opinion was held as truth for the entire excavated area of the necropolis (e.g. Bietak 1981: 72). However, during the 1939 campaign J. de Linage noticed walls and other structures

⁴ For the God’s Wife Satamun, see Vandersleyen in *Lexikon* V: 485, and Stasser 2002, the kohl-pot from Edfu omitted from the list of objects of Satamun.

appearing in a section at the southwestern edge of the tell (sectors NO and NOI), above the level of the necropolis, but several meters below Ptolemaic strata. De Linage also mentioned 'concubine' figurines of New Kingdom type and unspecified New Kingdom pottery found in 1939 in the empty space south of the mastaba of Isi (*Tell Edfou* 1950: 105). He even suggested that the town could have expanded westwards at that time and this should be taken into consideration as the reason for the abandonment of the Tell Edfu necropolis (*Tell Edfou* 1950: 106–107).

The extent of the necropolis is another question which cannot be answered based on the present state of research. The problem is closely linked to the issue of the location of the earliest pharaonic town and its directions of expansion, two aspects which are still far from clear despite numerous studies (Bietak 1979: 110–114; 1981: 72; Kemp 1977: 189–191). The location of the so-called mastaba of Posener can suggest, that already during the Fifth Dynasty the necropolis spanned the entire area of the approximately 100 m wide South Quarry, between the edge of the modern town and the sectors of the necropolis excavated in 1937–1939 (see Alliot 1935: 21, note 2, Pl. XX).⁵ In 1939, C. Desroches noted that the Old Kingdom necropolis extended also to the west of the excavated area, under the road bordering the excavated sector and the cultivated land beyond it (*Tell Edfou* 1950: 3). Old reports mentioned also the

discovery of Old Kingdom tombs in the modern cemetery situated to the north-west of the tell (Alliot 1933: 3).⁶ Tombs were not located only in the vicinity of the Ptolemaic temple (*Tell Edfou* 1950: 105). An overview of this data illustrates the extensiveness of the mastaba field in Edfu in the late Old Kingdom and in the early First Intermediate Period. For the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period, at least the eastern limit of the necropolis defined by the town wall is known. It is not possible to determine beyond doubt the extent of the Middle Kingdom necropolis in other directions, but it should be noted that there is at least one report of finding a stela of the said date on the northern rather than southern side of the tell (Gunn 1929: 5). There is no doubt, however, that tombs of both epochs are still hidden under the remains of the ancient town.

Recently resumed excavations at Tell Edfu have concentrated mainly on the town remains, but the necropolis has not been studied in full and further work may still bring new findings (Moeller 2003; 2005). Reexamination and reconsideration of the material from old excavations is another avenue of research. There are still many problems to be solved, particularly with regard to the Middle Kingdom necropolis. The full importance of one of the most significant Upper Egyptian towns will be fully appreciated only once this has been done.

⁵ Stone structures mentioned in the same place and indicated on the plan as remains of two mastabas were, in fact, connected with the ruins of the town, see Kemp 1977: 190.

⁶ Probably the same find was mentioned by Chassinat (1931: 302). An "Old Kingdom mastaba" is marked also close to the northern tip of the tell on a plan in Moeller 2003: 7.

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