

The Belgian excavations at Deir al-Barsja, season 2003¹

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38 figures

Abstract

The mission of the KU Leuven at Deir al-Barsha realised its second season. Research in the quarries led to the discovery of hundreds of new inscriptions of the time of Nectanebo I and II. Much time was devoted to the study of a large graffito depicting forty, mostly Greek, ships. Another interesting discovery is the presence of quarry graffiti dated to years 10 and 11 of Akhenaten. In the area of the nomarchal tombs of the Middle Kingdom, the epigraphic record of tombs 8-10 was finished. The clearance in and in front of the tomb of Djehutihotep was pursued. This has led to a better understanding of the architecture of the monument, to the rediscovery of four tomb shafts of the subordinates of the nomarch, and to the recovery of parts of Djehutihotep's tomb equipment. The excavation of some pits inside the tomb led to the discovery of decorated wall fragments. Further downhill Old Kingdom tombs on the northern flank of the wadi were excavated. Some tomb equipment of that date or slightly later has been found, but the area turns out to have been intensively reused in later periods as well.

Interestingly, numerous tombs turn out to contain Second Intermediate Period burials containing ceramic of Upper Egyptian style. Some tombs also yielded burials of Graeco-Roman date. In and around the early Christian habitations much evidence was found of food consumption on a grand scale. The excavation in the plain led to the discovery of an untouched cemetery area. The tombs date to the early Middle Kingdom and at least one was undisturbed.

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¹ The team consisted of M. De Meyer, D. Depraetere, L. Op de Beeck, C. Peeters and H.O. Willems. The excavations would not have been possible without the financial support of the Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Vlaanderen (Fund for Scientific Research Flanders) and the Onderzoeksfonds Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Research Funds of the Catholic University Leuven). A preliminary report of the first campaign will be presented in *Mit.Deut.Arch.Inst.Kai.* (in press). In this report, ample attention is given to the history and objectives of the project.

1. Introduction

This article presents the results of the 2003 season of the excavations of the Belgian Mission at Deir al-Barsja. Until last year, an article like this would have been illustrated using the old topographic maps of Fraser (1892) as reference map. On these maps, only Wadi Nachla, the heart of the site, is depicted, with accumulations of Old and Middle Kingdom tombs at the north and south slopes. During the most recent excavation season a new map has been created which, although still incomplete, shows that also outside the wadi a lot of activity was going on (figure 1).

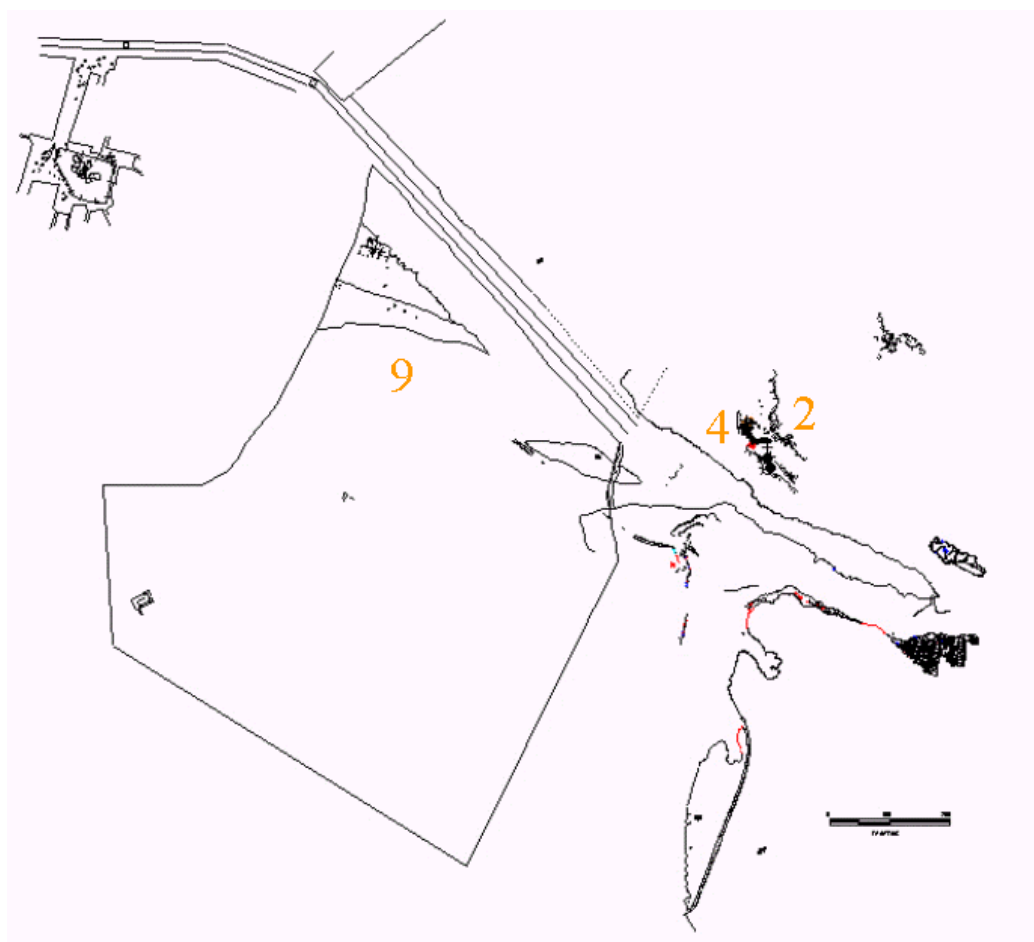


Figure 1. Recent, partly finished map of Deir el-Barsja. The numbers refer to the zones discussed in the text.

The intention of this paper is to prove that working at various locations within this large area, instead of concentrating on only one location, provides answers to broader scientific questions that would inevitably remain unanswered by focussing research on a single location. To illustrate the potential of our multi-location approach, the focus of this paper will be on the necropolis of Deir al-Barsja, although in passing the research of the stone quarries will be discussed as well. All illustrations are by the Belgian Mission at Deir al-Barsja, unless stated otherwise.

2. Stone quarries

After the evidence of last year of large scale activities of Nectanebo I in the stone quarries, indications have been found that Nectanebo II [Nachthorheb] was active here as well (figure 2). Again, hundreds of demotic graffiti have been documented and new pictorial graffiti have been noticed as well. One of the nicest examples of this latter category is a Thoth figure, which possibly dates to Nectanebo I. The supposition that in the wadi as well as in the direct vicinity of Wadi Nakhla stone was quarried in the time of Akhenaten, found further confirmation (figure 3). Stone quarries have been found with markings of exactly the same dimensions as the *talatat* and in the northern outskirts of the concession quarries have been encountered with graffiti that are dated explicitly to Akhenaten's reign.



Figure 2. Cartouche of Nectanebo II [Nachthorheb].

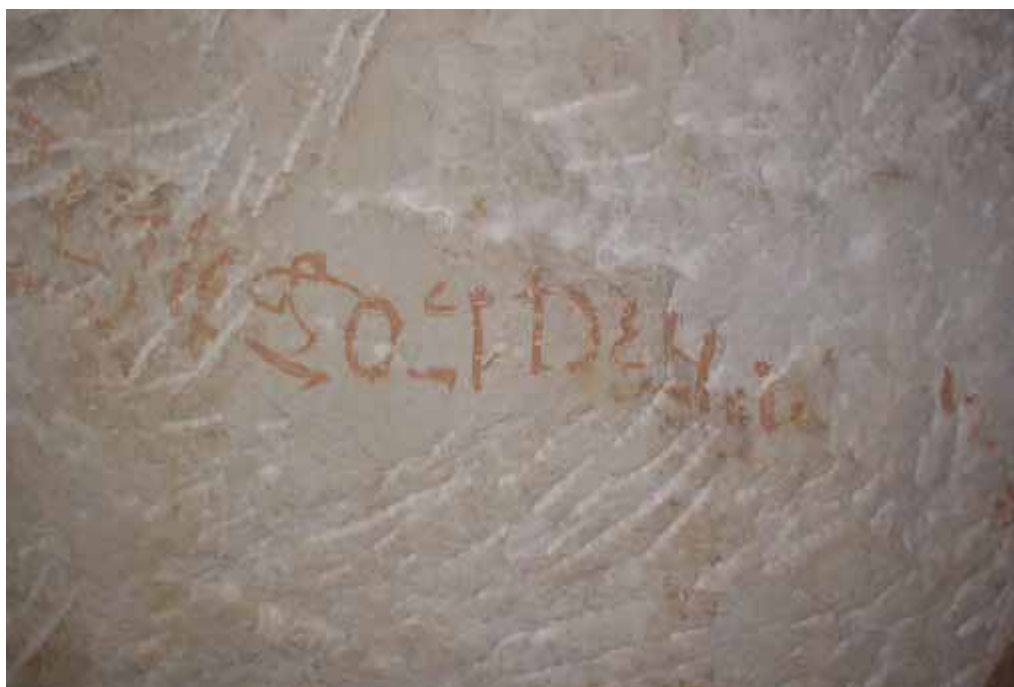


Figure 3. Graffiti, dated to the reign of Akhenaten.

3. Zone 2

Zone 2 (see figure 1) is the region of the tombs of the nomarchs of the Middle Kingdom. The tomb of the ‘astronomer’ Djehutinakht has now been entirely copied and the excavations are finished. The focus of this sector will be on the work carried out in and around the tomb of Djehutihotep.

The most recent plan of this tomb dates from an excavation report of Ahmad Bey Kamal (1900, see figure 4). The shafts in the forecourt of the chapel of Djehutihotep are marked in black. One year before, Daressy discovered here a series of beautifully preserved graves with famous coffins (with the Coffin Texts sigla B1C, B16-17C, B1-4L, B1-2P). When our work started, nothing was to be seen of the shafts on this spot. On the

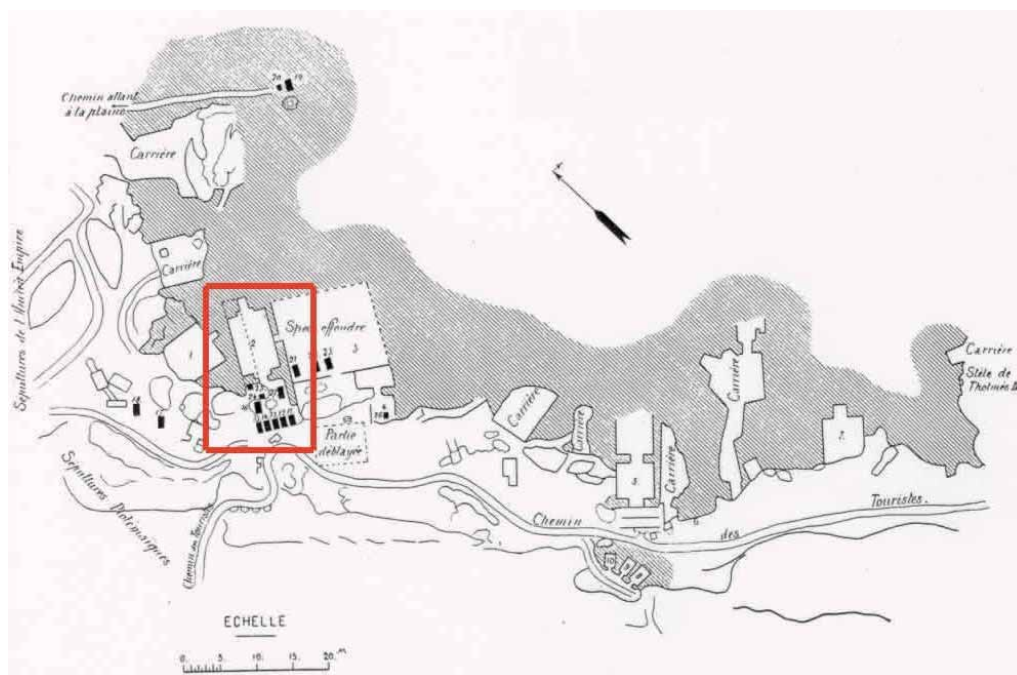


Figure 4. The position of the tomb of Djehutihotep (after Kamal, 1900: 15).

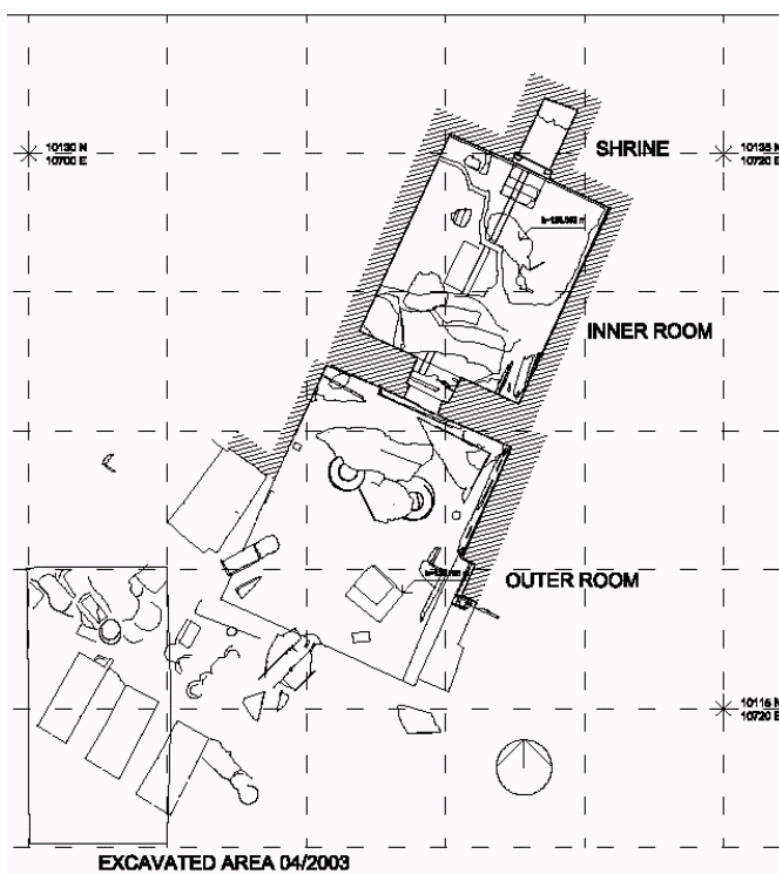


Figure 5. Recent plan of the tomb of Djehutihotep. Note the more western position of the shafts relative to the map of Kamal in figure 4. The squares are 5 x 5 m.

contrary, it proved impossible that these shafts were at the position where Kamal had drawn them. A large dump, deposited by Kamal, was clearly visible on the graves that were discovered the year previous to Kamal's appearance. After this year's excavations, the shafts appeared at more westerly location relative to Kamal's map

(figure 5; see also Willems, 2003). One of the objectives of the expedition is to reconstruct the contents of the tombs in order to publish an archaeological report of these important tombs, a century after their discovery. The dump contained numerous relief fragments and other interesting material that probably belonged to Djehutihotep. An example of these finds are the 13 statuettes shown in figure 6, which must have been part of a model of a barque, and two granary models. The workmanship is quite reasonable. Furthermore, two almost intact bracelets (or anklets) have been recovered, of which one is shown in figure 7.

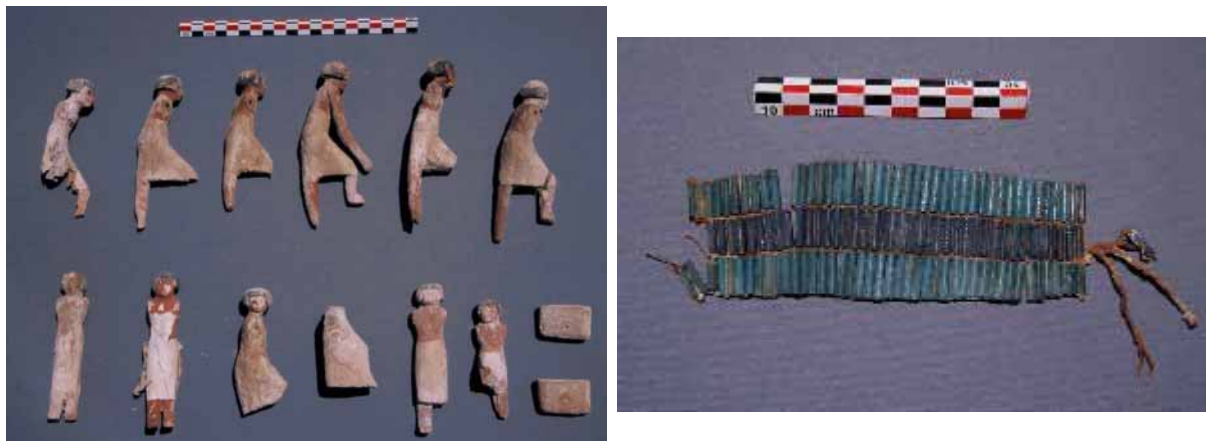


Figure 6 (left). Statuettes from the dump of excavations from the early 20th century. The material probably belonged to Djehutihotep.

Figure 7 (right). Largely intact beadwork on original thread from the tomb of Djehutihotep.

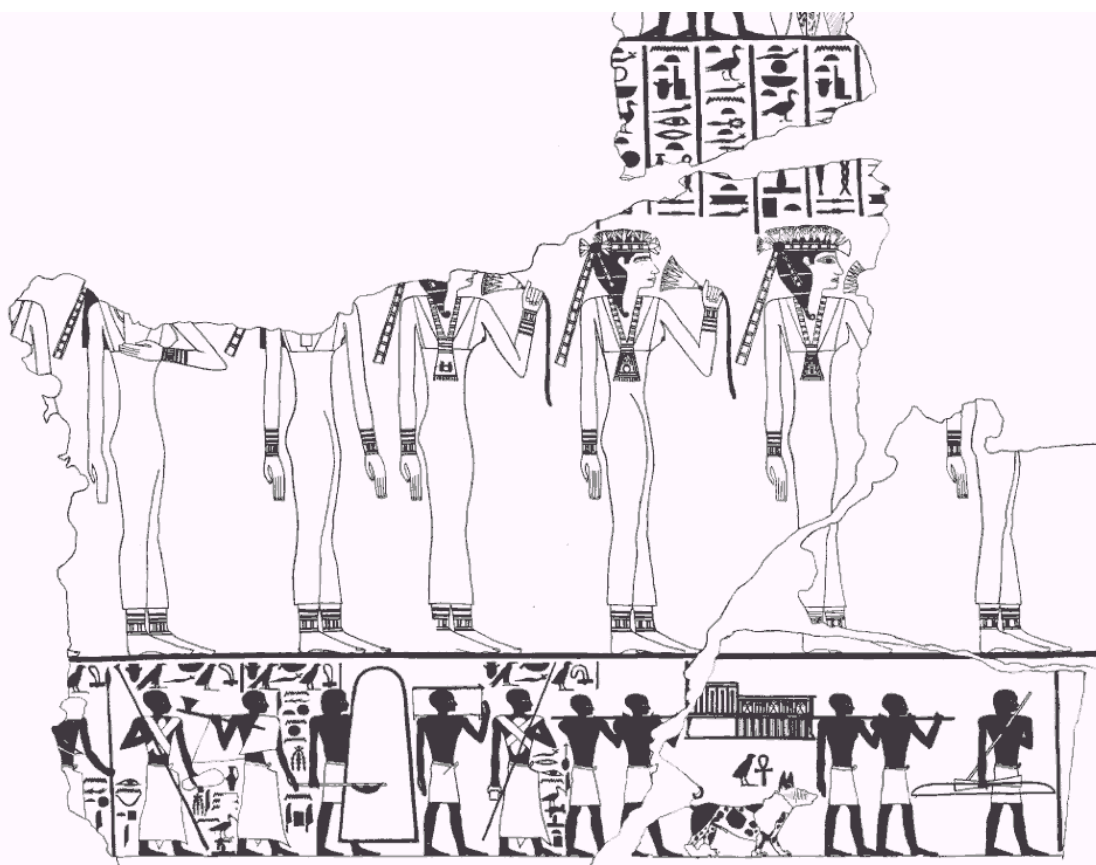


Figure 8. Procession of the daughters of Djehutihotep (after Newberry & Griffith, 1894: pl. XXIX).

A start has been made with the cleaning of the inner most chapel. In the floor of this chapel, four holes are visible, likely made in antiquity by robbers. Hundreds of larger and smaller decorated fragments of relief work

were recovered from these pits. Among them was also an envelope, addressed to G. Willoughby Fraser and dated at November 1891. This is exactly the time that Newberry's team, of which Fraser was part as well, was in Deir al-Barsja. It is therefore concluded that it was Fraser who produced the dump. Without a doubt this is tied up with the fact that he was also responsible for the transport of blocks from the tomb to the museum in Cairo and the British Museum in London; the remaining fragments have been encountered in the pits, sorted by type. Some of these belonged to the famous procession of the daughters of Djehutihotep, now in Cairo and London (figure 8). One of the masterpieces is the head, shown in figure 9, which has oddly enough not been included in the publication of Newberry & Griffith (1894), as many other fragments. In all, there are at least 1000 new fragments of the decoration of the tomb and this number is expected to rise, since the cleaning of the tomb is not finished yet.



Figure 9 (left). Detail of the procession shown in figure 8.
 Figure 10 (right). Map of zone 4, the Old Kingdom necropolis.



Figure 11. The various sectors of zone 4.

4. Zone 4

Zone 4 (figure 1) is situated lower at the north slope of the wadi; the zone is known as the Old Kingdom necropolis (figure 10), although almost no literature exists concerning it. The aim of the excavations here is to gain an insight in the different types of tombs and the dating of their use. Thirteen sectors have been excavated of which only an overview of the most important ones are presented.

Excavations in sector 1 (figure 11) were started last year, because the tomb in this area contains a restoration text dated to the late First Intermediate Period; a clear indication that the tomb dated at least to this period, although last year only pottery from the Middle Kingdom and later was recovered. This year, remnants of burial goods have been found that are likely to be dated to the late Old Kingdom, such as the alabaster model vases in figure 12. Remarkably, the tomb contained also pottery for which strong parallels with the Second Intermediate Period exist (figure 13).



Figure 12 (left). Alabaster model vases, probably dating to the late Old Kingdom.

Figure 13 (right). Pottery for which strong parallels with the Second Intermediate Period exist.

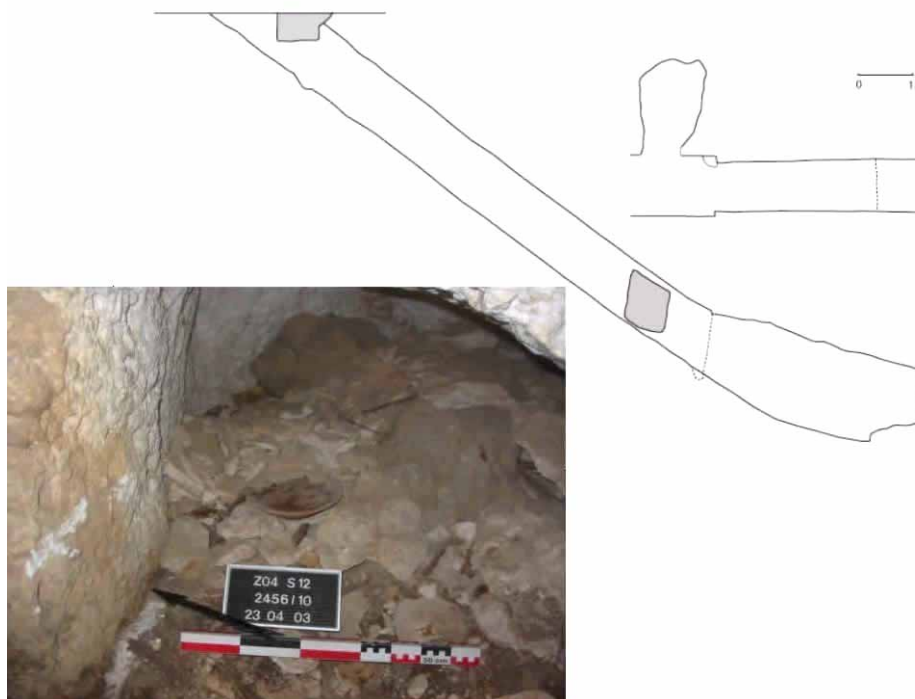


Figure 14. Map of the tomb in sector 12; the majority of the finds came from the side room (inset).

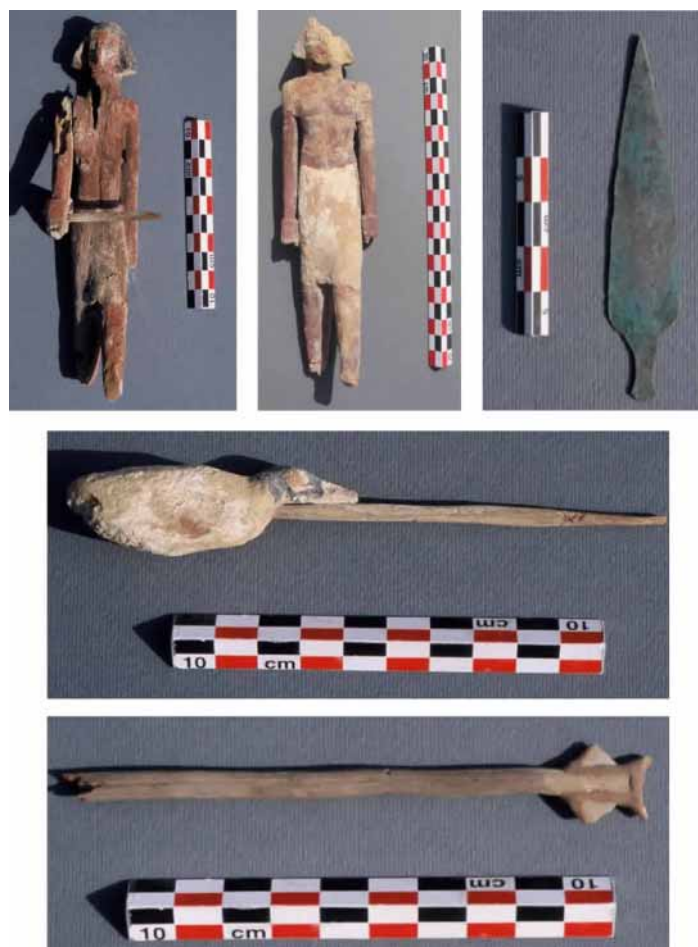


Figure 15. Finds from the tomb, including an offering bearer (top left), an offering bearer (top middle), bronze model utensils (top right), a speared duck (middle) and flint weapons (bottom).



Figure 16 (left). Greek Roman burial from the same tomb.

Figure 17 (right). Detail of one of the poor Greek Roman interments.

The tomb in sector 12 was completely different (figure 11). It consisted of a sloping passage (figure 14) where material from the late Old Kingdom or the First Intermediate Period has been found. The majority of the finds were encountered in the side rooms (figure 14, inset). Most of the remains were typical for the period, leaving no space for doubt of their date. Instances are the tomb models, among which an offering bearer, a speared duck, flint weapons and bronze model utensils (figure 15).



Figure 18. Mask from a more elaborate burial.

The same tomb also produced finds of later periods, like pottery from the Middle Kingdom and, again, the Second Intermediate Period, but especially remnants of burials from the Greek-Roman period. Only one of these poor interments in mats made of the ribs of palm leaves is more or less *in situ* (figure 16), although even this body was disturbed as well (figure 17). It is clear that here also other, more elaborate burials, must have taken place. Of these more elaborate burials, some masks have been encountered in the descending slope (figure 18; for another instance see Willems, 2003). Besides masks, parts of anthropomorphic coffins have been found, of which part of the collar and rest decoration is shown in figure 19 (left and middle). The remains look strongly similar to coffins from the 30th dynasty of early Ptolemaic era (figure 19, right). Finally, parts of pottery coffins have been recovered (figure 20). Without a doubt these are of the type Daressy (1900: 23-24) said to have found “...quelques momies reposaient (...) dans des cercueils en terre cuite de forme anthropoïde parfois peints en blanc sur le côté et ornés de dessins mythologiques, tandis que leur couvercle plat portait en relief une figure grossièrement façonnée.”, but of which nothing more is known from this site. The pottery coffin is partly painted white, just as some of the specimens recovered by Daressy, and the face recovered in the vicinity, shown in figure 21, belongs to this coffin or, if not, to a specimen of the same type.



Figure 19. Decoration (left) and detail of collar (middle) of an anthropomorphic coffin which look similar to the coffins from the 30th dynasty or early Ptolemaic era (right; after Ikram & Dodson, 1998: 241).

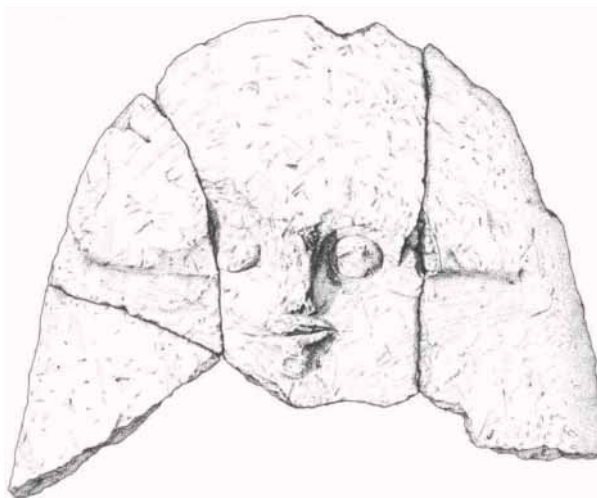


Figure 20 (left). Parts of a pottery coffin in situ.

Figure 21 (right). Drawing of the mask of a pottery coffin.

Another tomb to be mentioned was encountered in sector 13 (figure 11). Probably, this tomb dates to the Old Kingdom or First Intermediate Period as well, although no finds from this period had been recovered. Though robbed, the tomb still contained the intact upper part of the burial (figure 22). The pottery, of the pattern burnished type, points to a burial from the Second Intermediate Period. The specimen in figure 23 is a comparable piece, though from a different context.



Figure 22 (left). Intact upper part of the burial in a tomb in sector 13.

Figure 23 (right). The pattern burnished type pottery from the tomb (comparable to the pottery shown in the figure) points to a burial from the Second Intermediate Period.

The amount of pottery from the Second Intermediate Period, found in large quantities in zone 4, but also in zones 2 and 9, was surprising. Clearly, it belonged to a phase in which Deir al-Barsja was again used intensively as a necropolis. This is new information; pottery from the Second Intermediate Period was not

reported before from this area. Even more intriguing is the fact that the pottery belongs to the Theban type catalogue. Furthermore, the Memphite Marl C pottery from the Second Intermediate Period is suddenly absent. Instead, few instances of imitations of Marl C pottery in Nile D-fabric has been documented. This also points to the fact that at the end of the Second Intermediate Period, this area belonged to the Theban sphere of influence, culturally and likely politically as well. This is an interesting fact, because the stela of Kamose situates the border far more south; the actual relationships seem to be more complex than suggested by textual evidence.



Figure 24. Concentrations of bones of cattle were found under the houses of the Coptic hermits.

After the Pharaonic period, the Old Kingdom tombs, repeatedly used for reburials, were taken by Coptic hermits. One of their houses has been partly excavated. On the hillslopes, below the houses of the hermits, large concentrations of bones of cattle was found on various spots (figure 24), almost every time accompanied by cooking pots and amphorae. Often, in the immediate vicinity, date- and apricot seeds were found and occasionally even in large quantities. It is hard to believe that this was the daily food of the hermits, but it is reasonable to think that these are remnants of meals of religious holidays.

5. Zone 9

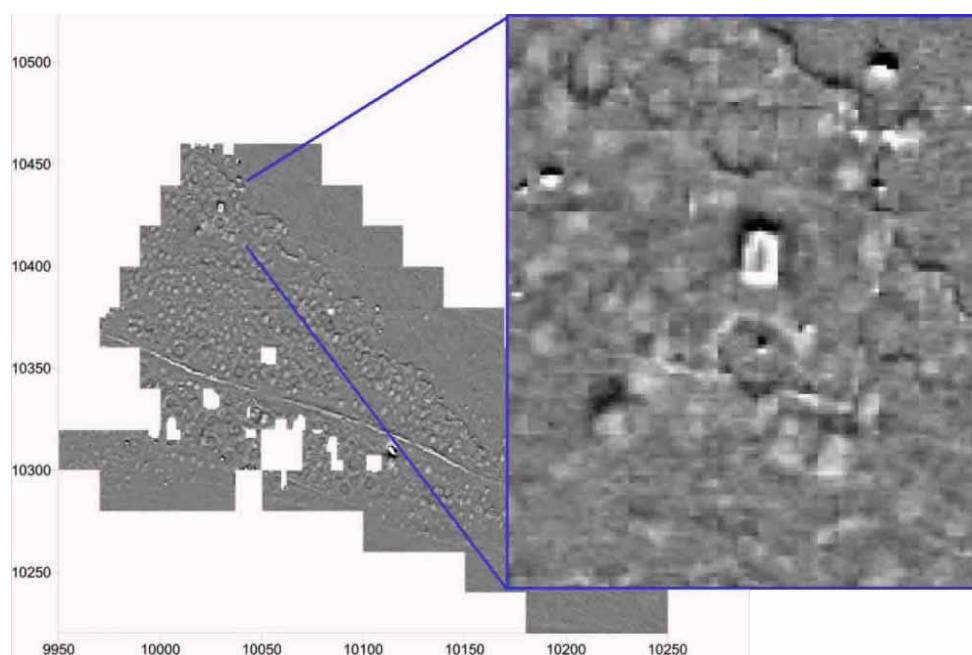


Figure 25. The magnetometric survey, which was done last year. Note the diagonal white line (an ancient road).

In zone 9 (figure 1), a magnetometric survey was carried out last year. Two results are worth mentioning (figure 25). First, a white line runs diagonally across the zone, which appeared to be an ancient road. There are strong indications that the path leads to the necropolis of the nomarchs in the hills. Second, some linear anomalies were visible, of which nothing could be noticed at the surface. A square, possibly a tomb shaft, was visible in the most obvious anomaly. Towards the south, two comparable rectangles could be discerned.

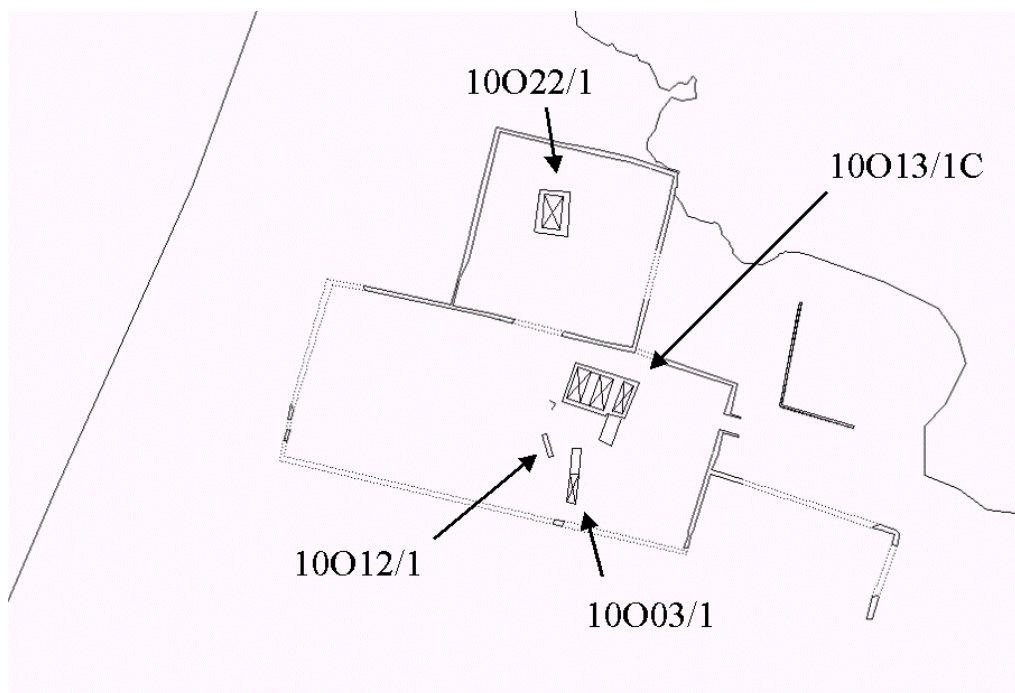


Figure 26. Four enclosure walls that surrounded the shafts in zone 9.



Figure 27 (left). The most northern tomb is disturbed, but the shaft contains an intact tomb from the Second Intermediate Period (10O22/1). The small tomb contained a body in a badly preserved coffin.
Figure 28 (right). The body in the coffin shown in figure 27 wore a decayed death-mask.

On the first day of the excavations, confirmation was obtained that the rectangular structure (clearly visible on air photographs, see Willems, 2003) was indeed a tomb shaft lined with mudbricks, within a surrounding wall. Unfortunately, of the surroundings only traces of the foundations remain. Excavations showed that the fact that only few of these walls are shown on the magnetometric map, does not necessarily provide information on the state of preservation of these walls. Surprisingly, some much better preserved walls do not show up on the map, whereas other, less clear traces, are mapped. The walls are almost completely eroded and at some places only traces in the sand remain. At the end of the season, parts of at least four enclosure walls that surrounded the shafts, were discovered (figure 26). The quarter is slightly comparable to the quarters of the Abydene tomb chapels, but the actual distribution is not clear. The pottery unmistakably dates to the early Middle Kingdom. The tombs have not been recently disturbed. The most northerly one has been disturbed, but because the shaft contains an intact tomb (see 10O221 on figure 26), which is dated to, again, the Second Intermediate Period, the violation must have taken place more than 3500 years ago. The small tomb contained a body in a badly preserved coffin (figure 27). The body was adorned with a decayed death-mask (figure 28) of which only the gilded face was relatively intact (figure 29). Some pottery, which contained offerings *in situ*, was found as well (figure 30).



Figure 30 (left). The death-mask (see figure 29), of which only the gilded face was relatively intact.
Figure 31 (right). Pottery with offerings in situ.

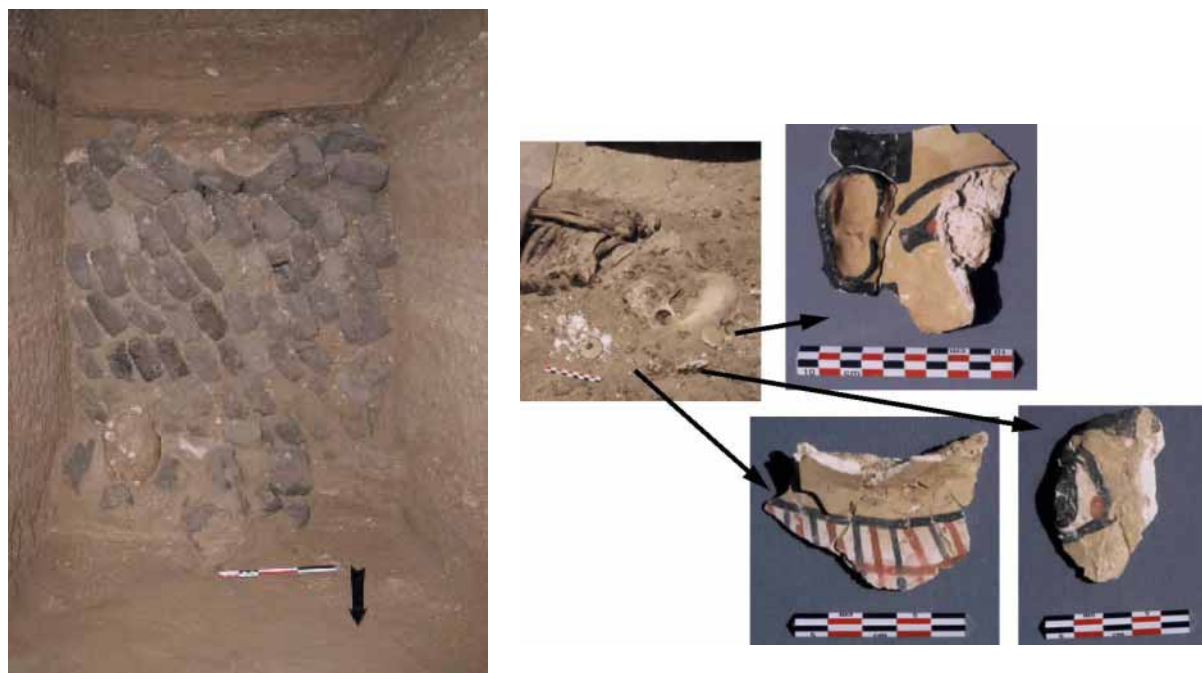


Figure 32. The intact door in the middle shaft of the tombs more to the south (see figure 26).
Figure 33. Few goods in a bad condition from another sealed tomb (10O03/1).

The accumulation of tombs more to the south (figure 26) was not disturbed since antiquity either. Even the door of the middle shaft was still intact (figure 32) but after the opening, it appeared that sand poured in through a hole in the ceiling. It is assumed that the sand originates from a higher burial chamber of an adjacent tomb. Due to the dangerous situation (the burial chamber is six meters below the surface and consisted of a mere room dug out in sand) the chambers had to be approached from above. In doing so, another sealed tomb was encountered (10003/1, see figure 26), which contained only few goods in a bad condition (figure 33).



Figure 34 (left). A complete set of pottery, with next to it (larger stones at the top) two alabaster headrests and (smaller stones in a row) a series of crudely finished, elongated alabaster objects at the entrance of the burial chamber of tomb 10003/1C.

Figure 35 (top right). One of the head rests, reconstructed.

Figure 36 (bottom right). One of the elongated objects. Note the worked top.



Figure 37. The closing of 'last years tomb' was made of large limestone blocks.

The only burial chamber of the three remaining shafts that could be reached this year, was in better condition. The burial chamber had already been robbed in antiquity and the coffin as well as the wooden canopic chest were entirely decayed. But much remained of the rest of the tomb equipment. At the entrance of burial chamber 10O13/1C, a complete set of pottery was still *in situ*, with next to it two alabaster headrests and a series of crudely finished, elongated alabaster objects (figures 34-36). There were two series of four of these objects, of which one series were found standing upright. The function of these objects remains unclear. Are these badly finished model vases or (because of their position, being sets of four and the crudely finished bottom), objects that were placed in a, now decayed, base? The headrests were crudely finished as well. The finds will be compared in detail with the finds from the big shaft tomb more towards the south, that was excavated last year, but few remarks can be made here. Last year's tomb (figure 37) was made of good brickwork and the floor and closing were executed in large limestone blocks. The tombs presented here however, were dug in loose sand with only minimal protection of the top of the shaft in mudbrick and a closing executed in the same, cheap material. The coffin in the tomb of last year was made of thick planks of cedar, decorated with fine relief and painting. The coffin from the tomb excavated this year was made of cheap wood of which nothing was left. However, a thin veneer of cedar was preserved on which the crude traces of *wꜥꜥt* eyes can be discerned (figure 38); the remnants of a cheaper variant of a comparable tomb inventory. This idea is suggested over and over again, for instance by the jewellery. The tomb of last year produced good quality fayence. In contrast, the beads in the tomb discussed here, which are probably all beads of the *weseh* collar of the deceased, have been made of a very bad quality fayence of brown colour. The idea of a cheaper variant of tomb inventory is also confirmed by the objects made of a low quality alabaster.

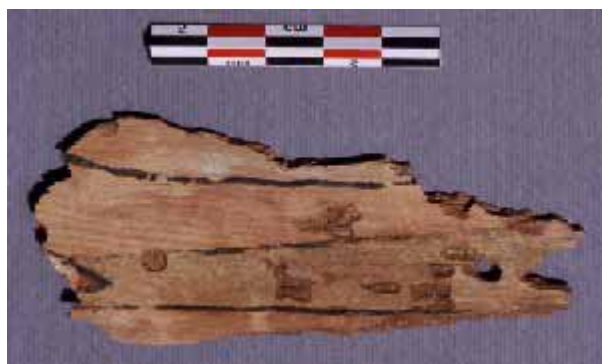


Figure 38 Comparison of the coffin from the tomb of last year (top, 10O13/1C) and from the tomb excavated this year (bottom, 10O15/1; note the differences in scale). See text for details.

6. Conclusion

The layout of the Middle Kingdom necropolis is becoming clearer, despite the fact that excavations barely started. In the axis of the site is a road that eventually leads to the tombs of the nomarchs on top of the mountain. The fact that the road cuts the necropolis in two and that the road leads to the tombs of the elite, which dominate the landscape by their position on the mountain, seems not unimportant. Especially to the south of the road are relatively large mastaba's, which must have belonged to very important persons of the society, though slightly less important than the nomarchs and their entourage. More to the north and at larger distance to the road, are tombs which evidently belonged to the less prosperous part of the population. A clearer picture of the social stratigraphy, as far as this is represented by burial goods, should be obtained in continued research.

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