



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

October 2019 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

"Travellers and Pilgrims Under the Last Pharaohs: Recent Investigations by the Oxford Expedition to El Kab" Luigi Prada

At the beginning of October Luigi Prada visited to talk to us about the work he has been doing at the site of el Kab as part of the Oxford University Expedition there.



Map of el Kab with Sites Labelled

He began with an overview of the site, to give us context for his work. El Kab lies halfway between Luxor and Aswan, about 2 hours south of Luxor. It's one of the oldest cities, and was continuously inhabited from the Paleolithic through to the Roman Period. The ancient Egyptians called the city Nekheb, and its patron deity was the vulture goddess Nekhbet (meaning "the one of Nekheb") - she was also patron goddess

of the whole of Upper Egypt. The Greeks called it Eleithiopolis (which is what Google Maps labels the city, see above) and the Romans used the name Leucothae.

There are three main areas of the site: the settlement (the walled city and its temples), the necropolis and Wadi Hilal (which contains the desert temples and rock inscriptions).

The settlement is not part of the Oxford University concession - it is being worked on by a Belgian team. It is surrounded by great walls which were built in late Dynastic times, probably dating to the time of Nectanebo II. One corner of these walls has been washed away by the Nile as its course has changed over time since the city was abandoned. The temples in the city are not as well preserved as in some other parts of Egypt (for instance Karnak), but they are still visible. Prada showed us some drawings from 1798 which showed that more was visible at that point, but as with a lot of ancient Egyptian monuments more has been lost in the last couple of hundred years than in the preceding 2 millennia. In this case the stones were reused in the building of the railway, and are now under the tracks and presumably lost forever. The site is in need of conservation and the Belgian team simply do not have the funding nor resources to do all of this work nor to document it all, it's a very large site. The change in the course of the Nile means that the water table is higher now than it was in antiquity and the sandstone that the temples were made from is drawing water and salt up out of the soil. This damages the stone and the reliefs carved on it.



The Necropolis

Prada now moved on to talking about the necropolis, which is part of the Oxford concession. The area he was talking about is the main part of the necropolis, but there are several other areas of tombs around the mountain. He said that the mountain has so many tombs in it that it's a bit like a block of Gruyère now! Some of the tombs are open to the public and in the 1980s a staircase was built for easier access (see photo above).

One of the key tombs at this site is that of Ahmose son of Ibana. His autobiographical tomb inscription tells of his career in the military, rising through the ranks to an important enough post to be able to afford this splendid tomb. This inscription is an important source for the historical detail of the late 17th Dynasty and for the reunification of Egypt that begins the New Kingdom. Another tomb is that of Paheri, a descendent of Ahmose and governor of el Kab. The third tomb that Prada mentioned was that of Reneny, another governor of el Kab during the reign of Amenhotep I at the beginning of the New Kingdom - he was going to come back to it later in the talk so all he mentioned at this point was that it has the earliest known depiction of horse and chariot in a private context.

One of the things the Oxford expedition are doing is mapping the tombs. Originally this was a British Museum expedition, which was then jointly organised with Oxford and finally solely run by Oxford. The purpose of the mission is epigraphy - they are not an archaeological expedition, instead they are primarily there to record and conserve the inscriptions. And part of this documentation is to make a proper map of the necropolis - despite over 200 years of knowledge of, and work at, the site by various people there isn't a good map. Drawing one is made more complicated by the number of tombs in the mountain - there are so many packed into the space that they run into each other inside because the tomb builders also didn't have a clear idea where already existing tombs were when they began a new one. Prada showed us a picture of one where the shaft from a tomb chapel dropped down into another tomb chapel. He also showed us some of their new map, and drew our attention to a 4th Dynasty mastaba on the top of the cliff. this is an unusual type of structure to find in this context. It clearly continued to be important in the activity at the site long after its owner was buried as material was found in it that dates to more recent periods.



Vulture Rock

The Wadi Hilal contains three main sites of interest - the Hemispeos, the Amenhotep III temple (or shrine) and Vulture Rock. The last of these has clearly had sacred associations from prehistory onward - the (very) large rocky outcrop stands in the middle of the wadi and is completely covered in inscriptions right up to the very top. Prada showed us some examples including a New Kingdom one and a Late Period or Graeco-Roman period one.

The Hemispeos is a temple that is set part into the rock and part a building in front of the rock. The whole of the complex was originally built in the Ramesside Period and then rebuilt in Ptolemaic times. It has a Hamman chapel which dates to the time of Ramesses II - this once looked a lot like Trajan's Kiosk at the temple of Philae, with the addition of a roof. Much of the archaeology at the site has vanished over the last couple of hundred years. Prada showed us one of the earliest photos of Egypt (dating back to 1842-1843) which is of the entrance to the the Hemispeos and shows how much is now gone. The entrance has been restored since with modern pillars and ancient stone at the top, but it hasn't been rebuilt as tall as the original.

In Coptic times the Hemispeos was reused as a hermitage, and so much of the decoration both inside and out was removed by the Copts - but only up to a height of about 2m, almost as if they were counting on no-one ever looking upwards! Prada drew our attention to a couple of parts of the original decoration that do survive. The first of these is that Cleopatra III is represented on both sides of the door which is very unusual - one would expect the king to be shown on at least one side. There's a theological reason for this - the temple is dedicated to female deities (a local version of Hathor and to Nekhbet) so the queen is most appropriate for this all female space. The other part he mentioned was a stela in the external wall showing Ramesses II offering to deities.



The Amenhotep III Shrine

The last part of the site that Prada described is the furthest from the Nile - the Amenhotep III temple. He said that when he's working at this structure it's a very long daily commute. The team live on the other side of the river from the site and commute to it daily by felucca. If they didn't go by boat then they'd have to drive 20km to the nearest bridge and 20km back, so the boat is much better! Then they walk from the river to the areas they are working, and the Amenhotep III temple is a long walk (see the map above). He said that sometimes the gaffir gives him a lift on a motorbike, which is a lot quicker but perhaps not quite as safe!

This structure is more properly referred to as a barque shrine rather than a proper temple. The main sanctuary is very small, it would fit into the hall we were having the talk in. There's very little "official" decoration outside. Inside is decorated throughout. There are four Hathor pillars with sistra headdresses. The decoration scheme includes the deities Amun-Re, Nekhbet and Horus of Nekhen - this close connection of Nekhen and Nekheb goes back to predynastic times. At the entrance to the temple both Amenhotep III and Thutmose IV are depicted, so perhaps it was begun by Thutmose IV and then completed by his son Amenhotep III. It may also have been built on the site of an earlier structure. During the Amarna period the Amun names were defaced even in Amenhotep III's name, and subsequently restored by Seti I - and this restoration was recorded in an inscription.

As with the Hemispeos the Amenhotep III temple was refurbished and expanded by the Ptolemaic Pharaohs. Prada showed us some old photos from 1842-1844 which show how substantial the pronaos (the Ptolemaic forecourt) once was. Some of the blocks that were once part of the pronaos are broken up behind the temple, and Prada is trying to document these. The plan is that if they can get good photographs of these blocks then they can do a digital reconstruction of the structure. So next season they're going back with a stone specialist to see if it's possible to move them without damaging anything so that he can photograph the inaccessible parts of the blocks. At the moment he's not sure how fragile the stone is, so isn't touching anything until he's talked to the experts.

After our break for coffee and cake Prada moved on to tell us about the work he is doing at the site. He is studying the graffiti, in particular from the Late Period to the Graeco-Roman Period (c. 7th Century BCE - 2nd Century CE). In modern times graffiti has negative connotations but in Ancient Egypt carving one's name in a sacred space could be an act of piety. Because of the modern viewpoint archaeologists in the 19th and early 20th Century mostly ignored graffiti. Now people like Prada are revisiting sites to look at this sort of secondary evidence which tells us a lot about the history of the site after its initial construction.

Graffiti can be categorised in many ways. Is it figural or textual? What script is it written in? What language? How was it made - scratched? painted? both? At el Kab there are examples of all these types. The textual graffiti are also written in all scripts and languages of Ancient Egypt from Dynastic times through to the Graeco-Roman period.

Prada told us about three main areas of graffiti. The first of these is in the tomb of Reneny, where the graffiti reveals the different way that this tomb was used in later times. Often tombs get re-used for further burials, but in this case it was more interesting than that. The main chamber of the tomb has always been open because that's where Reneny hoped offerings would be brought for his ka. In this chamber that

are some pieces of graffiti written in the demotic script dating to around 300 BCE - so roughly 1200 years after Reneny was buried there.

There is a large piece of demotic graffiti written above the charioteer which follows a standard formula often found in graffiti in temples. Prada likened writing this formula on the wall of a temple to lighting a candle in church - it means the person who wrote the graffiti/lit the candle is still present in spirit after they've left in person. The formula starts with "The perfect name of ..." and then the name of the writer. It continues by saying that the writer "endures in the presence of ..." followed by a god's name - this case the writer endures in the presence of "the Great Man". The next part of the formula is the date it was written. Sadly it can't be converted to a date in our calendar because it doesn't include the king's name - the Egyptians didn't use a continuous dating system, instead they dated to Year X of King Y. So if the text just says "Year 10" (for instance) you don't know whose Year 10 this was. At first glance that sounds like an odd thing to miss out, but it's not unusual when Egyptians wrote dates and in context it would have been obvious. Prada said it's a bit like writing "19" for the year nowadays - it's obviously 2019 that we mean, but give it 2000 years and future archaeologists will be not quite sure if it's 1919, 2019 or 2119!

As well as this large piece there is another shorter version of the same formula written by the same man. And using photographic manipulation techniques he has also found another version of this formula dating to the late Dynastic or early Persian Period (c. 6th Century BCE).

The "Great Man" referred to in these graffiti appears to be the tomb owner, Reneny. It appears that the main chamber of his tomb was reinterpreted as a shrine in the Late Period, and he was deified in the local area. Prada pointed at the examples of Imhotep and Amenhotep son of Hapu for other examples of this sort of thing happening. I was also reminded of a talk I went to in 2015 given by Janet Richards who talked about saint cults in the context of Abydos. Prada suggested that the presence of only one statue in Reneny's tomb chamber (rather than him being accompanied by family members as other people were in their tombs) was part of why it was reinterpreted as a shrine. Other evidence of this local deity "the Great Man" comes from names of people in the local area. It's pretty standard in Egyptian culture to give children names that include the name of a god (e.g. AMENhotep). And in a list of names from around the same time as these graffiti there are people whose names include the phrase "the Great Man". He's only ever referred to as "the Great Man" never "Reneny" by these later people - even though Reneny's name is in hieroglyphs in several places in his tomb. Obviously the people leaving the graffiti were literate, but it appears they weren't able to read hieroglyphs.



Graffiti at the Hemispeos

The Hemispeos also has quite a lot of graffiti. There are some textual ones but Prada mostly showed us the figural ones. A lot of these were made by people with questionable drawing skills - I don't have a picture of the most amusing one that he showed us (that looked a bit like a mutant ninja turtle!) but see above for some deities sitting on thrones. As well as Egyptian style figures this Ptolemaic era structure also has figural graffiti with Greek style motifs. One of these that shows up on a lot of surfaces is a drawing of a Greek style altar - represented as a square box with a ramp leading up towards it. Prada said that he thinks this motif is so prevalent here because the visitors who carved it conceptualised the temple as a large version of one of these altars. It's difficult to describe this without pictures but essentially the Hemispeos is built half inside and half in front of the cliff face and the temple is approached via a ramp, so it's quite like these altar drawings.



Graffiti Outside the Amenhotep III Shrine

The Amenhotep III shrine might be small but it has hundreds of graffiti everywhere. On the outside of the temple these include carvings of baboons, texts and many carvings of feet on the paving slabs. These last are an illiterate version of the texts in Reneny's tomb and are intended to represent the carver as always present at the site, standing in their "footprints".

The inside of the shrine also has a lot of graffiti. Prada pointed out that there is a significant difference between modern (Victorian mostly) graffiti and ancient graffiti. Ancient graffiti never damages the decoration - it uses the blank spaces on the walls. But modern graffiti is often carved right across whatever was already there. The ancient graffiti is votive rather than destructive, and the people who made it were respectful of the temple.

One of the common motifs in the Amenhotep III shrine is the addition of little ibis figures to the decoration. Ibises (and the baboons found on the outside of the temple) are animals associated with the god Thoth and are evidence of how the shrine has been re-purposed over its active life. During Amenhotep III's time the deities to whom it was dedicated were Horus of Nekhen, Nekhbet and Amun-Re. During Graeco-Roman times the primary goddess was a form of Hathor merged with Tefnut. A key myth from this period was that Hathor (the Eye of Re) had an argument with her father Re and so she left to go and sulk in Nubia. This means that the world is out of its proper order, ma'at is broken and so Re wants her to return to Egypt where she belongs. He sends the god of wisdom (Thoth) to persuade her to return, and he is successful in his mission. The annual celebration of her return takes place at the winter solstice, and this whole story is a mythological explanation for the changes in the sun's position in the sky over the year. At the winter solstice the sun is at its lowest at noon, instead of being overhead it's to the south. To the Egyptian mind this means that the sun must be in Nubia, and the return of the Eye of Re from Nubia brings the sun back higher (further north) in the sky. Thoth is a key player in that myth, yet isn't represented anywhere in the original decoration scheme - hence the ibis and baboon additions to the decoration.

His examples from these three sites demonstrated why projects like his are worthwhile, and how they add to our knowledge of the ancient sites. His starting point was to document the graffiti which had been missed out of the older publications (with their focus on the "original" decoration scheme), and not just document it but document it in context.

As he'd just demonstrated the graffiti gains a lot of its significance from its context - for instance those little ibis figures wouldn't mean much if divorced from the context of a temple whose dedication had evolved over time and now needed the presence of Thoth in the decoration scheme.

Modern techniques do make this sort of project much more feasible, and Prada finished up the main section of his talk by discussing a couple of the main techniques he uses. The first of these is photogrammetry which allows him to make 3D models of the structures he's studying. It's not a very complicated technique to do, once one has access to the software that does the work. He takes normal digital photos of the area he wants to model, each photo with about 30% overlap with the neighbouring photos until he has full coverage of the area. The software will then stitch these into a 3D model, and other software can be used to do things like correct the camera lens distortion and so on. The model the software generates can then be manipulated to

zoom in on details or to zoom out to get the full context for a piece of graffiti. He can also produce drawings from these models for publication.

The other technique is called D-stretch, which is the name of a piece of software that processes a photo to make the red coloured areas show up more clearly. It wasn't originally developed for Egyptological use, but the creator made the software available for anyone to use. It turns out to be very useful for Prada's work as a lot of Egyptian graffiti is written in red ink. He showed us some photos before and after D-stretch processing and details revealed were stunning - some areas looked blank to the naked eye but had a complete piece of graffiti revealed once they were processed.

Prada finished off his talk by telling us about a tomb of a priest from the time of Ptolemy III that they have recently (re)discovered at the necropolis. At the bottom of the cliff of the necropolis there are many Graeco-Roman tombs and in the 19th Century Lepsius had noted that one of them was decorated. And so they went to look for it and found it in 2018!

The tomb has a small main chamber, painted in several registers onto a white background. Later it has had niches cut into the walls (across the decoration) for crocodile mummies. As with his work on graffiti they have made a photogrammetric model of the tomb and used D-stretch to bring out the red details - again the palette is predominantly red so this works well (other colours used are pink, yellow and blue). Prada talked us through the decoration scheme, much of which was vignettes from the Book of the Dead. On the west wall there are spells 110 and 115 from the Book of the Dead, and also a scene with chariots and horses. This last is an unusual scene and he said it makes him wonder if it is linked to Reneny's tomb decoration (which was being used as a shrine during the the time when this tomb was built). On the east wall there are spells 1 and 143 from the Book of the Dead. On the top register D-stretch processing revealed that there are some demotic inscriptions that aren't visible to the naked eye, which list personal names.

The north wall is the most interesting - it is the wall that is opposite you as you come into the tomb and so the wall that you would see. The bottom register has another vignette from the Book of the Dead, this time spell 72. The top two registers have scenes of boats on the Nile. The top register had a flotilla travelling south and the middle register is the same flotilla going north. The direction the boats are travelling is determined by seeing if they have their sails up or not - a boat travelling south is travelling upstream with the prevailing wind so the sails are up. A boat travelling north is moving with the current but against the wind so has its sails furled and is powered by oars. One possible explanation for the scenes is that they represent the deceased's ritual procession to Abydos - but Abydos is to the north of el Kab and this flotilla is shown as going south first, so the team feel there must be some other explanation. Another piece of evidence that fits in here is that the only non-graffiti texts in the tomb are the cartouches of Ptolemy III and his queen Berenike - these are on the north wall, associated with these boat scenes. So the team's hypothesis is that the scenes are a record of a royal visit to (or via) el Kab, which would've been an important event in the life of this priest and worth recording in his tomb. There are inscriptions at the temple at Edfu which say that Ptolemy III himself was present at the founding, and so perhaps these scenes record Ptolemy III's flotilla travelling past el Kab to Edfu to found the temple there.

This was a really interesting talk, I'm particularly fascinated by graffiti - once you get your eye in you can find so much from so many different eras on Egypt's monuments. So it was really neat to learn about the ways that ancient graffiti has both the same and different motivations to modern graffiti. And to learn what it can tell us about how ancient Egyptians saw their own history and these sites that were ancient to them as well as to us.