

Deir el-Balas: A Theban palace from the time of the Hyksos expulsion - October 4, 2020.
Peter Lacovara - Museums of Fine Arts Boston.

Notes taken by Mick Tweddle and Fred Botha

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1 Location, current site, date, initial excavation

Deir el-Ballas is an ancient palace from the Late 2nd Intermediate Period, located between Dendera and Luxor on the West Bank of the Nile, 5 km north of modern Ballas and 40 km north of Luxor on the well-known, strategic Qena Bend.

Situated in a bay, the site stretches for 2 km along the cultivation and was excavated in 1900/01 by George Reisner for Phoebe Hearst. Pottery was sent back to San Francisco but mostly lost in the 1906 earthquake. Minimal excavation records were retained by Reisner in Boston.

Lacovara later mapped the site with Mark Lehner from Giza.

The site consists of the north palace, south palace, several elite villas, houses, workmen's village, chapels, administration district.

Walls of mud brick have decayed to faint outlines on the ground.

A cartouche of Sequenre Tao was found by Petrie on site and seal impressions of Ahmose were sent by Barry Kemp from Amarna.

The purpose of the site was to be the staging post for the troops and boats on their voyage north to wrest control of the country back from the Hyksos.

Encroachment of modern villages threatens the whole site.

2 North palace

The north palace is a large complex 300 m long and 150 m wide and was built as a two tier construction and functioned as a campaign tower. Reisner removed the upper floor.

Mud bricks were large - a cubit long.

Single tier columned courts surround the palace. At its entrance there are traces of a painted scene of soldiers carrying axes. Fragments of faience tiles were also found.

An ancient bakery was discovered with traces of an oven and sherds of bread trays. Also, a textile workshop with a loom, a spindle and spinning bowl for making thread and a weaver's seat.

Seventy blank seals of fine clay were also found.

Hathor seems to have been the local deity.

A Coptic monastery was later constructed on the site.

3 South palace

The south palace was located on a hill in two tiers with a staircase and magazines and storage rooms. Encased in mud brick, it appeared like a fortress.

Mud bricks used were much smaller than those used in the north palace.

4 Campaign north and site abandoned

Ostraca refer to the crews and boats on the campaign north to destroy the Hyksos.

After the successful campaign the site of Deir el-Balas was abandoned. There are traces of latter burials. Many artifacts found on the site confirm its importance.

Ahmoose constructed a new palace in the north, following the construction at Deir el-Balas.

5 Financial support

A grant has been received from ARCE to restore the south palace.

Other grants have been received from AIA and through Salima Ikram.

Future excavations will continue, pending finance availability and security clearances.

6 Questions and answers

Q How many people would have been at the site?

A A few thousand men. There were about seventy houses, including the elite villas. Ceramics show the presence of Egyptians and Nubians. Ostraca include Nubian and Asiatic names.

Q Was the strategic location for defending the Nile or a land invasion?

A The location was chosen for monitoring both the Nile and the desert - Hyksos and Kushites.

Q Was the site inhabited permanently or only temporarily?

A The site was not a permanent settlement. It was close enough to be supplied from Thebes. Some families were there in support but mainly those of officials.

Q Was the site a town or a campaign site?

A It was typical of a royal community like Malqata or Amarna and built for a specific purpose not for organic growth. Here it was for campaign preparation and defence. Rapid construction techniques were a quick way to make a big statement.

Q What was used to bind the mud bricks together?

A A softened mud and water mixture - similar to slip, the watered down mixture of potters.

Q Did the campaign sail along the Nile or the Red Sea?

A Only on the Nile.

Q Was wood used between every four courses of mud brick walls?

A No, though the south palace used reed matting between every fourth or sixth layer of mud brick.

Q How long was the site occupied?

A Between c 1650 and c 1530 BCE, so around 130 years. Like Amarna, it was a virgin site without previous occupation.

Q Was the timber used for constricting boats acacia or cedar?

A Cedar was used for ocean going boats, acacia for boats on the Nile, shown by the way it was used in construction and from left over timbers from refitting and repairs. Used in the palace, it was to brace the walls.

Q What deities were worshipped in the chapels?

A Some Hathor cows were found in bowls. Possibly there were other deities.

Q Was stone used for construction?

A Only for column bases with some stone recycled from Dendera.

Q What pottery imports were found?

A Plenty of Nubian pottery.

Q Was there any Cypriot pottery?

A Only one small jug.

Q Were there any scarabs from before Ahmose?

A None to date.

Q Were any papyri found?

A According to Reisner, the Hearst Medical Papyri comes from this site.

Q Did the pharaoh live here at all or was it only for campaign preparation?

A It is unlikely the pharaoh lived here - its main purpose was for campaign preparation.

Q When will Stephen Quirk's translation be published?

A In the next few years with the main publications.

Q What portion of the site now survives?

A About a fifth of what existed when Reisner excavated - a much smaller fraction of the original site.

Q Why were Reisner's initial publications so scanty?

A Deir el-Balas was one of his first excavations and he was refining his methods and techniques.

Q Were there any changes to the architecture?

A Only a blocked up doorway. Other changes would be hard to detect from the limited state of preservation.

Q Is there any evidence of mass food preparation from the bakery?

A Not so far - significant food could have been acquired from Thebes or Coptos.