



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

November 2020 Meeting

by Alison Woollard

“A Multi-disciplinary Approach to a Middle Kingdom Intact Chamber found in Qubbet el-Hawa” Professor Alejandro Jiménez-Serrano

The Essex Egyptology Group welcomed Professor Alejandro Jiménez-Serrano from the University of Jaén to its November meeting to talk about the discovery of tombs of 12th dynasty nobles at the hill of Qubbet el-Hawa, a site on the west bank of the Nile opposite Aswan and close to the island of Elephantine. Although the site has been extensively excavated since the nineteenth century the Spanish project has discovered intact burials of members of the family of the governors from the Middle Kingdom. Qubbet el-Hawa, the highest point in the area, was chosen as a burial site in the Old Kingdom, perhaps because it was close to Elephantine which was the capital of the area. The necropolis was used for burials up until Roman times. There is a distinctive domed shrine to an Islamic sheikh at the top of the hill with descending terraces of ancient tombs cut out of the hillside.

The University of Jaén has worked in the area since 2008 focussing on the study and excavation of tomb QH33, where the governors of Elephantine Heqaib III and his brother and successor, Amenemhat III were buried during the time of the 12th Dynasty pharaoh Amenemhat III. New tombs have been brought to light and excavated (QH34aa and QH34bb).

Professor Jiménez began by stressing the multi-disciplinary nature of the team involved in the project which included a ceramologist, a wood expert, a paleobotanist, chemists, a physical anthropologist as well as photographers and experts in photogrammetry.

Tombs in the northern area of Middle Kingdom tombs include QH36, the tomb of Sarenput I, the nomarch in the time of Senusret I, and the tomb of a woman named Staten which is a female version of the name Sarenput. This tomb was well equipped with items such as jewellery, amulets and a cosmetic box made of ebony. Other funerary complexes in the area include QH31, the tomb of Sarenput II, QH32, possibly belonging to Khema.

QH33, which was very damaged and full of later material, took 10 years to excavate, the identity of the owners being established as Neqaib III and possibly Heqaib Ankh. An intact chamber was discovered in the hall of pillars in QH33. This contained a double coffin with the name of a male owner on a female coffin. A blank space had been left for a female name. This chamber also contained a beautiful dagger with a bronze blade and a silver, ebony and elephant ivory handle. The dagger had never been used and was presumably made as part of the funerary equipment. Two other chambers in this tomb contained burials. In one was the coffin of Gaut Anuket. This had been plundered in antiquity but the coffin was intact and displayed an inscription clearly created by two different hands which suggests the practice of

buying a coffin in advance but leaving a gap where the name of the deceased could be inserted later.

In a second chamber the burial of Hequaib III was discovered. This was a simple burial and fits in with the tendency of the time to provide females with richer burials. Ten burials were discovered in tomb 34aa including that of Sattjeni A who had received gynaecological treatment.

Tomb QH34bb provided one of the most exciting discoveries of the project. It belongs to Li-Shemai who was the younger brother of Sarenput II, the regional governor during the reigns of the 12th Dynasty's Senusret II and Senusret III. From the filiation written on his coffin the team could place him in the genealogical tree of the ruling family of Elephantine: he was son of Satethotep and the governor Khema, which means that his grandfather was Sarenput I.

Part of the front of the tomb had fallen away. It had been looted in antiquity and was full of other material. It contained a shaft sealed with an unusual thick layer of mud. Pottery offering bowls were still located over the entrance to the shaft in a position which dated the burial to the middle of the reign of Senwosret II. The discovery of the shaft 10 days before the end of the season gave the team a problem: open it up or leave it for the next season? They decided to investigate and found a chamber at the bottom of the rubble filled shaft which contained an unopened double coffin. The shaft was then resealed ready for the next season. The team were able to use this time to plan the consolidation and restoration of the coffins.

Placed round the exterior of the coffin were a number of pottery items and wooden models of boats and sailors. The inner coffin was made of cedar wood from the Lebanon. The headboard of this coffin had been attacked by termites. On the inside of the coffin a scene represented the mummy being transported to the necropolis on a boat with a priest presenting the mummy with a flower. Infrared photography revealed that a section of the coffin had been prepared for the inscription of coffin texts but they had not been added which might indicate that the death of the deceased was sudden and unexpected.

Grave goods included a jar which might have contained perfume or oil and a shell inscribed with the cartouche of Senusret I. This item challenged the chronology as the parents of Shemai lived during the reign of Amenemhat II. Shells have been discovered in tombs throughout the 12th Dynasty. The four wooden model boats were in a poor state of preservation. The interior of the wood had been eaten by termites leaving only the outer shell which disintegrated when they were moved.

A CT scan of the mummy revealed that only the skeleton remained. There were no traces of mummification. At this period mummification was not used even for high ranking officials. The mummy had a necklace of faience beads which was typical of the mummies of high-ranking male officials at the time. The small size of the skeleton suggests a child of 8 or 9 years of age. It was also clear that the facial features suggested a black person which also challenges our traditional ideas about the ethnicity of ancient Egyptians. However, Aswan was on the borders with Nubia and there would have been several ethnic groups in the area leading to racial diversity.

One of Shemai's titles was overseer of the grain store which might seem out of keeping for a young child. This could have been the household grain store but Shemai was also given the title of lector priest which is unlikely for a young child as lector priests were required to read ritual texts. Perhaps these titles were honorary and reflected the status of the deceased. The titles could also have been awarded after death.

Questions at the end of Professor Jiménez-Serrano's talk included?

Where are artefacts stored?

In the Aswan Ministry of Antiquities store

What are your future plans?

The team cannot return to Egypt until a vaccine for Covid has been developed for fear of infecting the local people

Will the tombs be open to the public?

Most probably. The Egyptian authorities will require this. A wooden floor and illumination have already been installed in the tomb of Sarenput II

Will a book be published?

Yes – soon. “Descendants of a Lesser God – Governors of Elephantine. A history of Egypt from a southern perspective.”

Alison Woollard