



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

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by Alison Woollard

“The Catacombs of Anubis at north Saqqara”

Professor Paul T Nicholson

At the beginning of December Paul Nicholson from Cardiff University spoke to us via Zoom about his project at north Saqqara which started in 2009. The project will soon be published.

His fellow researchers were Salima Ikram from the American University in Cairo who studied the animal remains and Steve Mills from Cardiff University who was involved with the mapping of the catacombs. Professor Nicholson acknowledged funding for the project from National Geographic, Andante Travels and the Thames Valley Ancient Egypt Society.

The dog catacombs at Saqqara flourished during the late dynastic period (dynasties 25-31) and the Roman period. One possible reason for this was the desire to stress Egyptian traditions at a time when Egypt was subject to foreign rulers. They were certainly known about by the end of the nineteenth century as in 1897 Jacques de Morgan published his Carte de la Nécropole Memphite on which appear two catacombs labelled ‘T(omb) des chiens (A) and (B)’. ‘A’ is the larger catacomb which was the subject of Professor Nicholson’s project while ‘B’ is smaller and has mostly collapsed.

Animal cults existed from the first dynasty onwards such as the Apis bull. This cult was different from the remains at north Saqqara as only one bull at a time was regarded as the living image of Ptah. At each bull’s death a successor was chosen to live in a stall in the Ptah temple at Memphis and to become an oracle. From the New Kingdom onwards the bulls were buried in the Serapeum at Saqqara. The animals put in the Anubis catacombs were not special animals which had lived in the temple but mainly very young animals which had been specially bred and killed for the ‘votive mummy trade’. Visitors to the temple could show their thanks or express their hopes by paying for the mummification of a dog and thereby show their devotion to Anubis.

Other catacombs at Saqqara include two for ibis, one for baboons and one for hawks as well as a catacomb for the mothers of the Apis bulls. Imhotep, the architect of the step pyramid, was seen as the possessor of great wisdom and was therefore connected with the god of wisdom and learning, Thoth, and his associated animals, the ibis and the baboon. The presence of animal catacombs at Saqqara led Professor W B Emery to excavate in the area in the 1960s in his search for the tomb of Imhotep although this has still not been discovered. However much more was discovered about the animal catacombs as a result of his excavations. Professor Nicholson undertook his research from a desire to know more about the actual

catacombs rather than the temples and rituals which is where studies of the animal cults had focussed before.

The dog catacombs, which lie just to the north of the pyramid of Teti, had been created by using the burial shafts of third dynasty mastabas in the area. These mastabas were entered in the late period and corridors and galleries were opened up from the base of the burial shafts. The catacombs have long axial corridors from which a series of galleries open up. Some of the galleries cannot be explored since they are unstable. De Morgan thought that the catacombs dated from the New Kingdom but no evidence of this period has been found.

Temples to Anubis and Bubastis were situated in the area and it is possible that the original entrance to the Anubis catacombs was through the temple. The current entrance to the Anubis catacombs is in the back garden of the Chief Inspector of Antiquities for Saqqara. One of the galleries has been used for Antiquities Department storage. There is also evidence of early explorations such as a scrap of the Times newspaper dated 1910.

The catacombs are in a dilapidated state. Stone which has flaked away from the walls or ceilings is piled up against the walls and there have been serious rock falls where galleries have collapsed. Some of the galleries were unfinished. The safety of the areas where the project worked had to be checked by a mining geologist. Some piles of stone have clearly been built up, possibly the work of earlier tomb robbers who created 'steps' to make it easier to enter and exit the catacombs. The roof of gallery 8 contains the fossil of a marine mammal, perhaps from the time when the whole area was under water.

Many of the galleries are empty and those which do contain mammal remains show considerable evidence of disturbance. The remains have been dug over. The animal remains do not extend to the height of the galleries and niches can be found in the walls. These were used for the burial of specific animals which may have lived in the temple precincts. The jumbled remains on the floor represent the animals which were part of the votive mummy trade. Resin splashes on the walls suggest that priests may have entered the catacombs to carry out rituals.

The catacombs are very large. There are 49 galleries. The axial corridor extends to 170 meters and the distance between the furthest points of the galleries is 136 meters. Two phases of building can be identified. In the first phase the galleries are of the same length and their entrances are offset from each other but in the later phase the galleries are of varying lengths and they are not always straight. The entrances of these galleries also face each other.

Salima Ikram sampled the animal remains. She discovered jumbles of bones, some complete animals and just a few fragile preserved mummies. One of the niches contained a small coffin with animal remains inside it. The wood of the coffin shows that it cannot be earlier than the end of the Ptolemaic era. A pottery vessel was also discovered with the toe bone of a dog in it. Analysis of the samples taken indicated that there could have been 8 million individual animals in the catacombs. The vast majority of the remains were of 'canis familiaris' dogs which probably looked very similar to the dogs which roam the plateau today. There were also the bones of jackals, foxes, ichneumon and even a few cats. Most of the animals were less than six months old and there were nearly ten male animals for each female one, perhaps the result of Anubis being a male deity. The large number of very young dogs suggests that there were 'puppy farms' in the area which bred, killed and mummified the animals especially for votive purposes.

The absence of remains from many of the galleries poses another question – who removed the remains? It is noticeable that black marks from lamps exist where the remains have been removed but that such marks are absent in the areas with animal remains. The presence of lamps in the empty areas suggests that they were cleared by robbers who were either looking for valuables or removed the remains which could be used as fertilizer. The animal remains were very flammable so the lamps would not have been placed close to them. There would have been some small bronze items in the catacomb worth stealing most probably in the individual burials in the niches. A few bronze fragments were found in the niches during the excavation. The presence of robbers is also suggested by a tunnel dug between galleries 5 and 6. The spoil from the digging remains in place; had the tunnel been dug by priests they would have removed the spoil.

The removal of the animal remains for fertilizer in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is well attested as licences were granted for its removal. People working there at the time left one clear clue – a galvanised cauldron stuck in a shaft.

Professor Nicholson then answered questions:

- Are any further excavations planned?
No
- How big were the puppy farms?
The puppy farms were probably small. The practice would not be seen as cruel at the time as the pilgrims were providing the dogs/Anubis with an afterlife. Visitors might not have been aware of how the dogs were procured
- Would the practice have raised money?
The provision of mummified dogs would have been an important part of the local economy
- Why were dogs used when Anubis is represented as a jackal?
We think of Anubis as being represented as a jackal but this is a convention. The ancient Egyptians might have viewed dogs and jackals as much the same thing
- Were the mummies reused?
Mummies might have been re-wrapped and reused
- Why are the galleries only filled up to half their height?
Could be a problem of weight/subsidence. Ibis galleries are usually fully filled but the birds are in jars which helps to support some of the weight.
- Were the dogs eviscerated?
No. It is also suggested that they were not killed but laid out in the sun to de-hydrate
- Is there any evidence of radon gas?
Very low readings
- Do the remains show any genetic problems?
Not obviously. There is some evidence of fractures, perhaps as the result of beatings
- Are there any older animals?
Some of the niche burials were older
- Are there any more details about the wooden coffin discovered in a niche?
It was not decorated and the wood has not been identified