



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

September 2021 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

"Life on The Edge: Updates from Hierakonpolis' Elite Cemetery" Renée Friedman

The talk at our September 2021 meeting was given by Renée Friedman about the latest work at Hierakonpolis. Of course as with everything else in life their work at the site has been disrupted by the pandemic, but they got a full season in early 2020 before the disruption began and hope to get back in November of this year for another season. And she said that the time during lockdown when they weren't generating new finds gave them a chance both to re-examine some of their older finds and to think about what unprovenanced material in museums might have originally come from the site.

Friedman began by noting that she was going to assume that we were familiar with the site itself and with previous excavations that have taken place. I think in general we all were, but if you need a bit more context the website of the project (<http://www.hierakonpolis-online.org/>) is very good (and you can also sign up to be a Friend of Nekhen (<http://www.hierakonpolis-online.org/index.php/join-us-now>) to support the team's work at Hierakonpolis). She drew our attention to a couple of regions of the site on the map – the ceremonial centre at the north-eastern edge and the breweries in the wadi to the south-west, as well as to the settlement of Nekhen itself further to the north-east. Today, however, she was going to concentrate on the elite cemetery site referred to as HK6 which is also in that south-western wadi (see the map on their website (<http://www.hierakonpolis-online.org/index.php/hierakonpolis-map>)).

They have worked for many years at HK6, which is not just a place for burying the dead. It has a unique mortuary landscape with large tombs each accompanied by subsidiary human and animal burials. There are also superstructures over these tombs which functioned as temples and the whole site is enclosed by a wall. The central zone of the area contains burials dating from the Naqada IIa period through to the Naqada IIc period, when there is a hiatus with no burials in the HK6 region. Then the elite burials return in the Naqada III period in the northern part of HK6. One of their current objectives is to get a better idea of the later use of the site, as well as the full range of use of the site, so recently they have started to look at this north area of HK6 and found more than they expected!

Before telling us about those finds Friedman first discussed the central zone where the predynastic burials are. There are three phases of use at this part of the site, each bigger and more elaborate than the last, and they have found items that were used in rituals connected with these structures. She took us through several objects that have been found at structure 07 as an example – there were seashells in one corner, whilst in another they found the oldest known falcon statuette in Egypt. There were also several items associated with the hippo found in another

corner – this included some figurines as well as a set of clappers made of hippo ivory with hippos carved along the edge (a bit like the animals carved on top of combs). There were also a lot of arrowheads, of a couple of different types – I think she said there were 175 of one of the types, so this really is a lot. As well as their own finds Friedman told us that they have also identified other objects from museum collections that probably came from this part of the site. She gave us an example of a spear head in Liverpool which has similar (modern) markings on it to a bow-tie shaped flint also in Liverpool. The bow-tie flint in turn is very similar to some of their own finds at Hierakonpolis, which suggests that these two Liverpool items both came originally from the site. And based on their known provenance (when purchased etc) it's clear that there was plundering of the site in the very early 20th Century CE.

Keeping with the theme of weapons Friedman next turned to the ceremonial centre at the north-eastern edge of the site (HK25) where there are other weapons, including an intriguing collection of fire shattered flint fragments. These include many pieces of arrowheads and knives. And once again in museum collections there are also some of these burnt flints – including some in the British Museum which were given to them by Petrie himself with a note that they were "found south of the fort", which makes them plausibly part of this deposit. Other examples are in Brooklyn Museum, and between their own finds and those in Brooklyn there are at least 15 shattered maceheads. Which as Friedman put it is "not a small number of headbashing implements"! Overall there are at least 40 weapons in this deposit of various types (some of which can't be determined). But why were they burnt? Friedman said that one suggestion is that it might be have been part of a ritual for decommissioning the ceremonial centre before it was moved to the new temple in Nekhen itself. She noted that maceheads and weapons were also found in the Main Deposit (associated with that later temple at Nekhen) – there were at least 225 maceheads in that deposit which according to the original excavation report looked "like a potato field" when they were found.

The high concentrations of weapons at HK6 and HK25 suggests that these sites were involved in displays of status and power. The weapons are very well made and so show that the owners are wealthy and of high status, and as weapons they are inherently indicators of physical power. They are also symbolic – in Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis (also called the painted tomb, and from a later period than these maces) is a scene of a man wielding a mace above other figures, which would later develop into the very common iconography of Pharaoh smiting enemies. She was, however, keen to stress that this wasn't just symbolic – the elite of this period really would be using these to bash heads – but her point is that the use of maces as symbols of the power of the ruler has been going on for longer than we might think.

Another typical find in the HK6 cemetery are flints shaped into animals of very fine workmanship – these appear to be a Hierakonpolis speciality. And so once again Friedman mentioned some examples that can be found in museums with little provenance but seem by their similarity to pieces with good provenance to be from Hierakonpolis. One example she gave was a pair of Barbary sheep which were clearly made by the same artisan as each other. There are also human shaped figural flints, which are only found at HK6. These worked flints, both animal and human, were buried at the peripheries of tombs and she thinks they might perhaps provide a belt of protection around the tombs. And this is perhaps analogous to the actual animals that are buried there – it's notable that every animal found at the site is also represented in the flints. However not every flint has a linked burial – there are no giraffes (a point she came back to a few times, the team has been looking for a giraffe burial for 20 years now). There are also no ibexes, despite flint examples – and Friedman said that actually this is not just in HK6, there haven't been any ibex bones found so perhaps this is one animal that the Egyptians didn't kill! But there

are animal burials to go along with the flint forms of elephants, hippos and crocodiles.



Friedman next took us through the three of the mortuary complexes that they have distinguished. Tomb 16 is the earliest of these, and is where they found the best preserved of the funerary masks. Tomb 72 was partially intact and included a fine ivory statuette, it dates to around a generation or two later. And finally Tomb 23 which was possibly the last of the burials in the central zone of HK6 – a notable find in this tomb was a calcite scorpion. All three complexes had above ground architecture, all had grave goods and all had subsidiary burials of humans and animals surrounding them. And they were also all burnt.

Ceramic Mask from Hierakonpolis

It's most clear in Tomb 72, where there are objects still in place. These include ivory combs, a statuette and rubbing stones with palettes. And all of these were, Friedman emphasised, found in or near the original location where they had been placed during the burial. However the tomb owner's body had been reduced to bits of bone. So this disturbance of the body took place in very ancient times and wasn't motivated by robbery. It was an act of aggression specifically against the owner, who was brought out and burnt with his superstructure.

Tomb 23 shows other signs of targeted destruction – in this tomb were unearthed around 600 small fragments of a statue. This had been intentionally and thoroughly destroyed. Some of the fragments are the ears and nose of the statue, so this allows Friedman to estimate that it would once have been life size – one of the earliest known statues on this scale. She noted that most statues seem to be found missing their noses and ears, but in this case they have the nose and ears and are missing the statue!

The reason for this destruction and hostility towards the occupants of these tombs is not clear, but notably after this there is a hiatus of burials at HK6. The elite of the next few generations are buried at the painted tomb cemetery which is about as far away from the wadi as you can get and still be at the site of Hierakonpolis! Then after this there is another change of opinion about these ancestors – when the elite return to the HK6 cemetery site they renew some of the earlier burials, some of which were about 400 years old by this time. Clearly they wanted once more to be associated with these now distant ancestors, and their own tombs are built at the northern part of the wadi complex.

There was previously an assumption that these new burials were on an unused part of the site, but given the amount of work these ancient people did to restore the central zone Friedman started to wonder if that had really been the case. Did they

instead remove what was already there to build their tombs? So that was why they decided to investigate that part of the site rather more thoroughly. Friedman said they picked their site to excavate based on both the geophysical data (which showed signs of a man-made structure) and on evidence from previous nearby excavations. When Michael Hoffman had excavated at Tomb 11 he found a lot of predynastic pottery (the tomb itself was Naqada III so this was anomalously early). So this looked like a promising place to start to look at what may have been there before the Naqada III tombs were built.

When they started to dig the tomb emerged looking just as the remote sensing had suggested it would – mudbrick walls around the tomb looking very similar to the structure of Tomb 11. As it was so close (only 2m away) and so similar she decided to designate it Tomb 111. Inside the grave they found several pieces of pottery which allowed them to date it to the Naqada IIIa2 period, which is just prior to the 1st Dynasty. It had been badly plundered but they were delighted by what the robbers left behind. This included two sets of arrows made from ivory which had been fitted with tiny bladelets of flint. Because these were fitted into custom made grooves it was even possible to re-unite the bladelets that had fallen out with their original arrow! These long ivory arrows/arrowheads may have once been set into another ivory rod – this two part structure would mean that at least part of the arrow could be retrieved after use.

Another item is rather enigmatic but also rather beautiful. It consists of a row of ivory animals all attached to a stalk – a leopard following antelope. It also had malachite deliberately applied in spots on each side of the piece. From all the fragments found it appears to have been some sort of openwork rectilinear structure, but they don't know what it was for. The openwork design is unique to this find, and Friedman said it looks like someone showing off their skills (and the owner showing off the resources he could command)! It must have been stunning when it was whole, whatever it was.



Scorpions from the Main Deposit at Hierakonpolis

Friedman also showed us a carved knife handle that they've found in this tomb – a very exciting find as there are only 11 other ones ever found (in issue 30 of *Nekhen News* there is a report on this knife handle including photos and drawings (<http://www.hierakonpolis-online.org/nekhennews/nn-30-2018.pdf>)). The blade itself wasn't there any more and there is some damage to the handle but quite a bit of the decoration can still be made out. It's carved on both sides of the handle in very fine detail with many tiny figures in the design. On the flat side there are rows of animals, as is familiar from previously known knife handles. These include cattle, leopards, storks and a giraffe (which I always think of as the "four legged bird" in this context since hearing John Wyatt talk at the EEG a long time ago (pre-2013)). The other side of the knife handle has unique decorative motifs. Around the two long sides and the curved end of the handle are a row of animals, and these enclose two registers depicting boats. The row of animals begins with a scorpion on the lower edge, which is a motif never before seen on a knife handle. It is, however, common in other contexts at Hierakonpolis and seems to be unique to art from the site during this period. The other animals include Barbary sheep, and what might be a falcon (a symbol that's very much associated with Hierakonpolis). There is also what might be an *akh* bird, the original Egyptian symbol of the horizon. Friedman thinks that this row of animals might represent east on the upper edge and west on the lower edge of the knife, curving round the Nile as represented by the central registers of boats. The top register of those boats has three boats that are quite hard to identify. There are some similarities to model transport boats of the period, but other features look like the cargo ships shown on some early Dynasty 1 labels. The boats on the second row are clearly sacred boats, with heads at the ends of the boat. The significance isn't clear, however, but as these knife handles are so rare it must have been important to the creators.

So having completed the excavation of the tomb Friedman said they started to investigate the edges around it – looking for evidence of a superstructure as well as of earlier use of the area. On the north side of the tomb, which was next to Tomb 11, they were continuing the work begun by Hoffman which had turned up predynastic pottery in that area. They found more of this material, including pieces of a large ceramic statue of a hippo! The pieces they found were quite substantial, which gives them a fairly clear idea of what the whole structure must have looked like. The pieces included the head, which was 50cm long, as well as two of the legs. The whole thing must've been about 2m long – which is about life size for a juvenile hippo! This is an amazing piece of ceramic sculpture, and not just in an aesthetic sense. It is also an amazing piece of technical engineering – if nothing else firing a 2m long piece of pottery would be really rather difficult.

The next obvious question is who made this hippo? Friedman said that there are no other large scale hippo sculptures to compare it to, but there are smaller hippos which might be similar in form to this big one. One was found at Abydos, and dates to the earlier predynastic period, and a different one dates to the Naqada III period. Neither is a particularly close match and the dates don't help to decide if this large hippo was original to the earlier cemetery or if it was part of the restoration work done when the elite returned to using HK6 as their cemetery in the Naqada III period. On one side of Tomb 111 they uncovered a carefully made slope with a retaining wall, which Friedman said looks like it would've made the perfect platform for the large hippo sculpture. The tombs here, Tomb 11 and Tomb 111 look like they're squeezing themselves into the space next to this platform, so it seems they are likely later structures and the platform was the reason they wanted their tombs to be there.

The hippo statue does not seem to have stood there alone in splendid isolation, and Friedman took us through some of the other finds from the area. One was a complete predynastic macehead – this is actually only the second complete one

they have found in the whole 20 years of excavation at Hierakonpolis, most have been in pieces. Not only that it was the only weapon they found in this part of the site (as compared to the hundreds she was talking about earlier in the talk from the central zone of HK6, or the ones in the burial at Tomb 111 itself). There are also a sizeable collection of figurines, combined from both Hoffman's excavations and their own, which are almost all male. This is very unusual for the period, there are usually also female figurines. Friedman said she can find parallels for some of the fragments they've found which lets them reconstruct what they must've once looked like. For instance there's a pierced hand that matches a more complete example in the Ashmolean Museum. There are also fragments they've found with modelled fingers, which are really rare. The only male ones with even vaguely secure provenance are now in Boston – they were bought near Hierakonpolis at a time when items were being sold from the site so it seems plausible that they originated there. The matching hands that she has found do make that even more likely to be the case. Friedman said she thinks it's possible that the modelled fingers on these male figurines are a specific feature of Hierakonpolis art.

Some of the objects they have found are much less easy to figure out – she showed us a photo of a pottery ... thing ... which she can't even work out which way up it goes let alone what its function may once have been. Others are easier – for instance there is a clay hippo on a smaller scale to go with the monumental one, and she thinks that the hippo flint that they have may once have been on this slope too (it was found about 20m away). More enigmatically again are some sandstone sculptures – their forms are fairly recognisable, albeit damaged, one is probably a lion, another some other form of quadruped, and two seem to be parts of birds. But what their purpose was is unclear – each has a socket in the base of it, and so Friedman speculates that perhaps they were standards or some sort of architectural embellishment. Perhaps they were fittings on a kiosk of some sort on the slope?

The next question after "who?" and "when?" is "what were people doing here?". For that Friedman said we needed to look at the pottery. There's a limited range of shapes of pottery found at this part of the site. Almost all the pieces are little round bottomed red bowls or black-topped beakers. The bowls have abraded interiors and indications of having been burnt around the rim of the bowl – this might indicate that they were used as lamps, and Friedman said they were planning to do more testing to confirm this. Why were there so many? They don't seem to be from disturbed tombs, so they seem to be evidence of ritual activity at this slope with its hippopotamus sculpture.

Friedman did give us the technical scientific way to describe the results of their tests on the residue left in the beakers which I totally failed to note down because those details were not her point – the beakers were used for beer! So the people who came here to this slope with its monumental hippo were there to drink beer. But why here? And why round a hippo? Friedman said that "why here?" is the easier question to answer – at the time this was all taking place this was an open area at the edge of the cemetery. So it allows for a bigger audience for the events taking place than the more densely packed central zone would. And it has better access to the breweries! It's also a liminal space, an appropriate place for people to come together and respect their dead, and raise a glass.

But why a hippo? Friedman pointed out that the hippo was the largest, and quite possibly the most dangerous animal that these people would've regularly interacted with. And both the predynastic and the later Egyptians had a mixed relationship with the hippopotamus – it was often depicted as the target of the hunt, but if it was seen as controlled then its power could be harnessed for protection. Even more intriguing is the relationship that later hippo goddesses have with lamps and

lights. Friedman showed us some examples of this – like the goddess Ipet in the Book of the Dead as a vignette to go with the spell for lighting the lamp. Or another example where the hippo goddess is shown holding a flaming torch to protect the tomb and the offerings – and she noted that these offerings include beer.

So perhaps this context can be pushed back into prehistory – here we have the hippo, the lamps and the beer at the edge of the place of the dead. Friedman returned to this in the Q&A session at the end – she said that once she'd been very determined that one should not project back from Pharaonic Egypt to prehistory, but she is increasingly thinking that maybe sometimes you should do that. It's a continuous history, and so one should try and see how imagery and ideas develop from prehistory into Pharaonic history rather than draw a line between the two.

Friedman concluded by saying that despite the pandemic they've been able to explore more of the site, and she drew together all the threads of the talk. The picture of the HK6 cemetery in predynastic times has now evolved to have two areas. In the central zone the elite showed off their power, and their weapons. And now they see that the area at the outer edge is where the living gathered as the sun set and lit their lamps under the protection of the hippo, and raised a glass (or hopefully more than one) to the dead.

Earlier in the year the Essex Egyptology Group donated to the Hierakonpolis Expedition, and so in the Q&A session Friedman talked a little about the restoration work on the fort (which is what our donation went towards). They are currently working on repairing the south wall, which has ancient plaster remnants on the one side of it that they are also hoping to conserve. This is a large project and is expected to take a long time. She also mentioned that when Garstang first excavated the fort it was white with whitewash, and they think that when the fort was an operational building there must have been people who were responsible for painting it over and over to keep it white – a task which must have been a bit like painting the Forth Bridge: when one end was finished it was time to start over at the beginning.

This was an absolutely fascinating talk – it's exciting to see how Friedman and her team are building up a picture of how the people living so many thousands of years ago interacted with and celebrated their dead.