

Essex Egyptology Group

May Meeting Report

In May we welcomed Dr Piers Litherland who told us all about the work of the New Kingdom Research Foundation in the Western Wadis at Luxor. His detailed and personal account of the recent discovery of the tomb built for Thutmose II was exciting and helped us to experience the progress of the project as if we had been there, but he had much more to tell us.

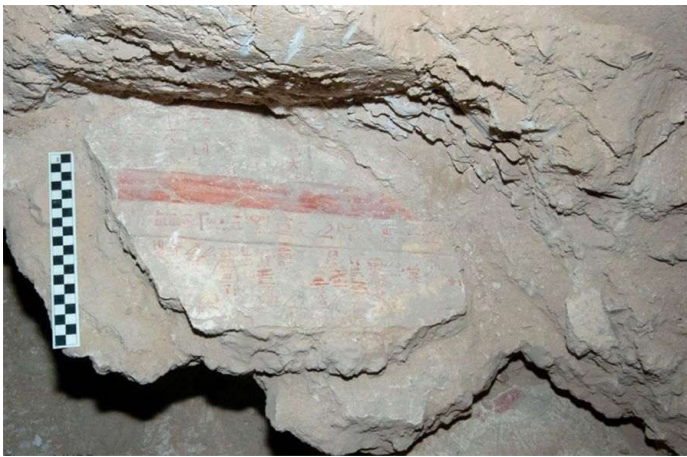
Very little of the Western Wadis has been studied before, though Howard Carter was certain in 1916 that they were worth exploring. Dr Litherland emphasised the importance of studying what you actually find rather than what you expect. Whereas our experience of popular sites, such as the actual Valley of the King, has been conditioned by modern tourism the wadis give a different impression: palaeolithic hand axes which are one to two million years old have been found and there is evidence of water running down the cliff faces of the wadis suggesting climate change in ancient times.

Dr Litherland described earlier discoveries in the Wadis. For example, in Wadi Bairyia (Wadi B I) his mission had discovered the tombs of royal women and children from the time of Amenhotep III. Smashed ceramics, bones and wood showed that the tombs had not only been robbed but also deliberately destroyed. There were also traces of the original workers: tools, footprints, a preserved fig, linen and ceramics. Cracking in the mud by these tombs showed that the area had once been saturated with water. As this water was not ground water it must have been rain. Numerous roads were discovered in the area including a chariot road used by the king for hunting. Could this area have been more like savannah than desert at the time? Data from Greenland ice cores also suggests an increase in rainfall in this period.

Howard Carter had made an uncertain identification of the owner of the the only known tomb in Wadi C. In 2022 Dr Litherland's work here uncovered foundation deposits but then came across something unexpected: steps down to a partially blocked door. The entrance was big; could this be the tomb of someone important? The corridors and chambers beyond the door were full of flood debris which had set like concrete and the poor condition of the rock meant that ceilings were also prone to collapse. Team members who crawled over the debris had particular trouble with the sharp salt crystals which had formed.



The entrance to the tomb



A fragment of the Amduat

No funerary objects were found or evidence of tomb robbery, but there were pieces of painted plaster which had fallen from the walls. In one chamber these fragments have been identified as coming from the Amduat which was usually reserved for kings of the 18th and 19th dynasties. Other fragments contained the beginning of the name Thutmose but did not show whether this was Thutmose the I or II.

Finally in February 2023 a fragment was found naming “ the great chief wife, his beloved, Hatshepsut, may she live”. Only one Thutmose had been married to Hatshepsut so it was becoming apparent that this was the tomb in which Hatshepsut had buried Thutmose II who died unexpectedly after only three or four years on the throne. But where had the burial been moved to and why?

The presence of a layer of silt suggested that the tomb had been flooded and subsequently emptied. Chisel marks in the cliff walls of the wadi and the presence of walls created with large blocks of stone also provided evidence of work carried out in antiquity to divert flood water. Inscriptions in the tomb of Ineni (TT81), who was an architect and government official at the time, refer to him inspecting royal tombs and carrying out works to improve them which provides textual evidence that work was carried out to protect the tombs.

One particular detail in Ineni's biography is: “ I created fields of Nile mud to cover their tombs in the necropolis.” Could this be connected to evidence found in Wadi C? The team found that layers of limestone, plaster and plaster mixed with mud and red “tufa” covered the entire landscape. There was a buttress of such material next to the tomb entrance made up of layers of plaster, mud, ash and blocks from the top of the cliff which looked natural but which had been constructed. Had this been done to conceal the entrance of another tomb?

Overview of the excavation site



There are many problems with the identification of mummy GG61066 from the Royal Cache as Thutmose II: the age is too high, the labelling is inconsistent and no funerary objects connected to Thutmose II have ever been found. If GG61066 is not Thutmose II. Such evidence means that the true mummy is still to be found and could well be in Wadi C behind the man-made buttress of mud, plaster and rocks.

Further support for the idea that this might be the tomb to which Thutmose II was moved after his first tomb flooded comes from other wadis in the area. They too have early 18th dynasty burials. There is also evidence of water in Wadi 300 where there are remains of animal dung and insects. The traditional view of the ancient climate leads to the idea that there was no water or vegetation in the 'desert' area and that the population relied on fixed farming close to the Nile. However, the climate could be much more variable and could create opportunities for hunting and gathering extra resources which in turn led to peaks of prosperity in the New Kingdom. The production of 600 plus Sekhmet statues by Amenhotep III are an example of such a peak.

The mission will return in September 2025 to continue removing the man-made buttress.



Members of the New Kingdom Research Foundation a few weeks after finding the tomb in the autumn of 2022.