

Essex Egyptology Group

1 February 2026: Dr Mélanie Flossmann-Schütze, Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich.

Animal Cult in Tuna el-Gebel: The animal necropolis and the priest settlements in Ptolemaic times

In February, Dr Mélanie Flossmann-Schütze gave the group a most interesting and detailed talk via Zoom on the animal cult in Tuna el-Gebel.

Tuna el-Gebel and Hermopolis Magna are sited between Beni Hasan and Amarna in Middle Egypt and date from the 26th and 29th Dynasties, the Ptolemaic Period into the Roman Period. They were places where religious communities lived and worked with sacred animals. Excavation work has been carried out by teams from Cairo & Munich. At Hermopolis Magna, an 18th Dynasty temple of Thoth held sacred temple animals (probably built during Hatshepsut's reign). At Tuna el-Gebel, were the first animal burials and the tomb of Ankh-Hor. Two of the four original colossal seated baboon statues survive that date from the reign of Amenhotep III.

The Late Period rulers of the 26th-29th Dynasties were responsible for animal burials at Ibiotapheion (meaning 'feeding places'). They enacted a large construction programme. In the 30th Dynasty, a new pronaos temple of Ptah was built at Hermopolis Magna, including a new temenos wall and sanctuaries for Nehemetawai. At Tuna el-Gebel, a new temple of Osiris-Baboon with an enclosure wall was constructed. Of the 30th dynasty temple, only a few foundation bases remain, plus two statues of Rameses II & Nectanebo, discovered during the German excavation just before WW2.



Hermopolis Magna & Tuna el Gebel in the Ptolemaic Period:

The pronaos temple is the main temple there was completed by Ptolemy I. The temple Dromos was also reorganised. At Tuna el-Gebel, the extension of the Ibiotapheion provided cult places and chapels. A new settlement with cult places and chapels was created at the temple dromos.



The subterranean construction galleries were excavated onwards from 1952 by Sami Gabra. Chronologically, the 4 galleries run Gallery D, C, B then A to provide resting places "of the ibis and the baboon, which is in the west of Hermopolis". The archive of Sami Gabra (now Cairo Uni) has never been published.



The Pre-Ptolemaic Galleries: date from the 26th Dynasty (Psamtik I - Gallery D feature corridors, hewed stone staircase, pot sherds, and pots containing animal burials wrapped in linen bundles - ibises, acts, mouse, and vertebra of mormyrus, tilapia & barbel. Eggs showing specific developmental stages of ibises, plus the coffin of the famous high priest Ankh-Hor who chose to be buried among the sacred deified animals. Several fine ibis, baboon and Oriris-Baboon statuettes were found.



The superstructures

A Temenos wall at Hermopolis Magna is earthquake-resistant with its concave construction. The main access to the underground structures of the 30th Dynasty (Gallery C) has been excavated and part reconstructed. A priest papyrus archive was found there, together with a stone block with the hieroglyphs 'Osiris-Baboon'. The Temple has no central shrine, but instead a staircase leading down to underground structures.

Cult places in the early Ptolemaic galleries

The Ibis niches are found in the upper wall area, the baboon niches lower down near the floor.

Katrin Schlüter's publication provides important research for the recording of painted textile fragments and indicates the un-plastered areas where textiles were stretched and fixed to the walls. One of these shows Ptolemy II offering to Osiris-Baboon.



Cult chapels for deified baboons: Chamber CC2 shows Ptolemy I in front of different Osirian gods.

A long chamber retains cult places and stone benches for priests to sit.

Gallery A dates to the Roman Period

Burials stacked in corridors rather than in dedicated niches.

Hermopolis Magna was in use up to the 4th Century CE - so animal burials were carried out there for almost 1000 years between 600BCE to 400CE.



Zooarchaeological analysis

120 Mummified primate types were found in Gallery C, and 92 in Gallery B.

Primate distribution showed that they came from central Africa.

Tooth disease, osteoporosis, vitamin D deficiency, due to the improper housing of animals, were discovered.



Texts on pottery coffin TG2468 / Malawi Papyrus 482 reveals that an inhabitant from Fayum was transported to Tuna el-Gebel, mummified and placed in the chapel wall by Hor, the priest of Lord Thoth.

As well as various priests, others are listed as living there include scribes, administrators, a washerman, gardeners, craftsmen, goldsmith, stonemason, master builders, barbers, brewers and weavers.



The 2nd settlement beside the Thoth temple is shown in a reconstruction drawing

Dromos Settlement

Along the processional way from the animal necropolis and the Settlement Thoth-Temple, six tower house complexes have been excavated. These have concave outer walls which are earthquake-resistant. They were built contemporary with the expansion of animal necropolis during the reign of Ptolemy VI. They have a staircase at the south-east and may have had up to 5 floors.

Oven batteries, bread moulds, a millstone, bread stands were also excavated there.

Inhabitants

The family archives (*dd-hr*) of inhabitants were discovered under the floors in these houses. This includes the names of priests and the sacred animals. Cult places with surviving fragments of plaster and depiction of sitting sacred baboons.

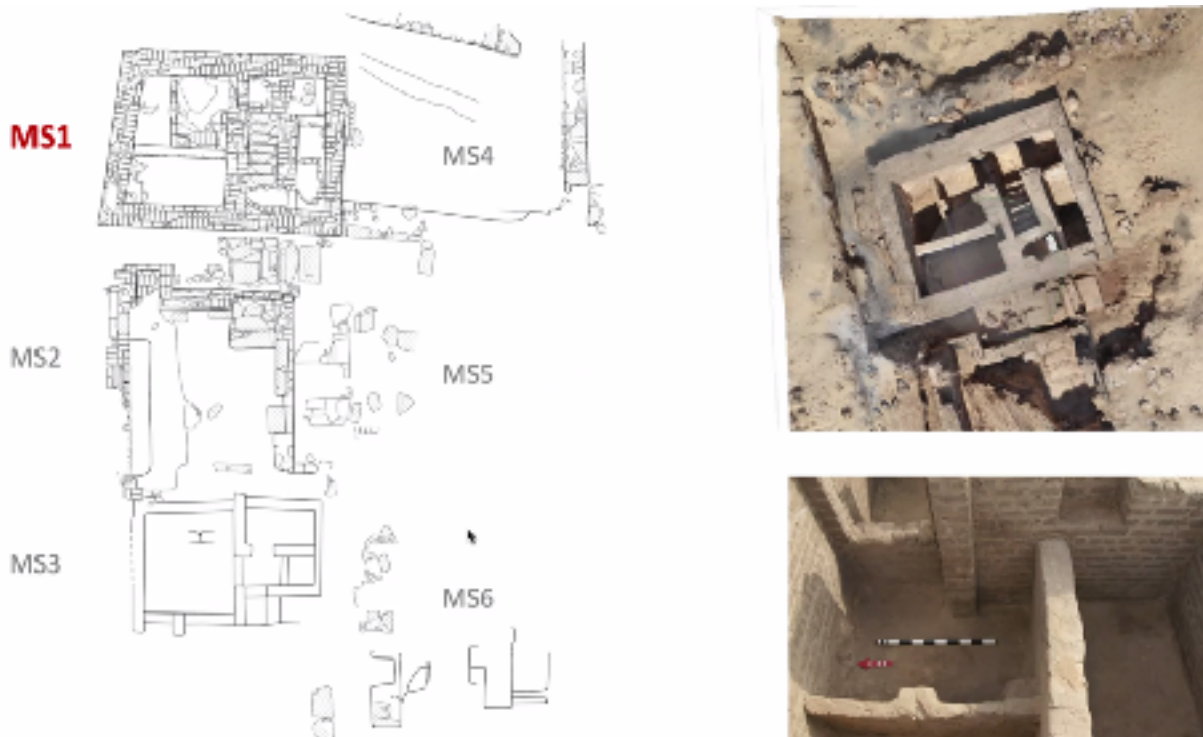
Remains of wild animals with signs of cutting & chopping include antelope and gazelle. Bones with traces of chopping & cutting include cattle, sheep, goat, chicken and duck. Also, nearly 400 mollusc examples were found at the settlement. 1200 animal bones, analysed for the diet of inhabitants, revealed that



no fish or pork was present, suggesting these were taboo items. But several types of fish for the sacred ibises from the Ibiotapheion were found.

The **mountain settlement** is aligned with animal necropolis, the temple, the residential area, and the dromos structure.

The Tower Houses



MS1 is a rectangular tower house, MS2 features a collapsed roof construction, a sunken pit loom area, and the remains of textile fabrication. The waste dump produced materials for whicker work, foodstuffs & materials for dying textiles. MS4 revealed evidence for a rich, balanced diet of inhabitants. Exotic fruits such as peaches, cereal analysis showed the shift from emmer to durum in the Roman Period, Alexandrian clover for animal feed, oil seed, flax, many different types of nuts & seeds, vegetables were analysed. The absence of fish or pork suggested people were subject to food taboos.



Q&A

Janet - why so much in Ptolemaic Period? Due to construction of underground chambers, more recent in time.

Tilly - loom pit, hanging loom ?

Pippa - when were tower houses first built? Leemann's PhD gives Late Period in Hermopolis Magna, so around 600BC in Egypt.

How do we know there were about 5 floors? Due to the thickness of walls and the depth of foundations. Felix Arnold excavation at Elephantine. Up to 8 or 9 floors were possible.

Alison - where were the textiles on walls found? Some on the floor, others at an art market + fragments in situ matching parts found elsewhere.

Alison - Sami Gabra - why did he not publish? kept delaying then died. A private collector has 80% of his archive.

Tilly - Why did tower houses first appear? - due to taxation of land - cheaper that to go up than out; can be kept cooler; are earthquake stable due to concave walls. All floors built at same time, not added to later.

Michael Tweddle, 3/2/26