

TELL EDFU

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The remains of what once had been the provincial capital of the Second Upper Egyptian nome can be found at Tell Edfu, which is one of the last well-preserved ancient cities in Egypt. This site is situated a few meters west of the well-known Ptolemaic temple (fig. 1). Tell Edfu is one of the rare examples where almost three thousand years of ancient Egyptian history are still preserved in the stratigraphy of a single mound. The Edfu excavations thus have enormous potential for increasing our understanding of ancient urbanism in Egypt.

Egyptological fieldwork has traditionally focused extensively on tombs and temples; by contrast, the study of settlements is a fairly recent discipline within Egyptology, in which the idea that Egypt was a “civilization without cities” prevailed until the 1970s. Tell Edfu provides the unique opportunity to contribute new data to this area of research. The site has suffered great losses by the *sebbakhin*, local farmers who, at the turn of the twentieth century, quarried away these abandoned mounds in order to reuse the loose soil and mudbricks as fertilizers for their fields. At Edfu they left two empty areas, the so-called North and South Quarries, where settlement remains were cleared down to the natural bedrock. This destructive activity was stopped only after World War II. From 1921 to 1939 Tell Edfu was excavated by several Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale (IFAO) and Franco-Polish missions exploring the Byzantine, Roman, and Ptolemaic settlement remains on top of the tell, as well as the Old and Middle Kingdom cemeteries that occupy the southwestern corner of the site.

The current Tell Edfu Project started in 2001 on a relatively small scale, focusing on the study of the visible enclosure walls in order to analyze the development of this provincial capital. During the first three seasons of this survey we have identified the Old Kingdom town center, which lies quite close to the Ptolemaic temple. Remains of the oldest town walls are visible in the eastern part of the tell, running along its southern end where they seem to have formed a corner turning eastward. Further elements have been detected in the north, where five walls are clearly visible in the exposed vertical cuts left by the *sebbakhin*. These walls can be dated by ceramic evidence to the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties. Furthermore, the archaeological evidence shows clearly that several new enclosure walls were erected during the First Intermediate Period incorporating a much larger area than before. Fortified town walls dating to this period have been identified in the northern and southwestern part of the site. Thus, the town expanded westward to almost double its size, from about 7 ha to at least 13 ha. This is a period which has generally been regarded as the “First Dark Age” of ancient Egyptian history, a theory that needs to be revised in view of new evidence from Tell Edfu and other provincial towns in Upper Egypt.

From 2005 onward the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) granted us permission to start archaeological fieldwork at the site. The main structures that have been excavated so far are a large silo courtyard of the Seventeenth Dynasty (1630–1520 B.C.) consisting of at least seven round silos which have a diameter between 5.5 and 6.5 meters, making them the largest examples so far discovered within a town center. Storage installations of such kind have been poorly investigated but played a crucial role in the redistributive character of the ancient Egyptian economy. In an earlier building phase a hall with sixteen wooden columns stood in this place, which was later used for the granaries. According to the pottery and seal impressions found within this context, this columned hall can be dated to the early Thirteenth Dynasty (1773–1650 B.C.). The seal impressions were made with scarab seals and provide much evidence for the administrative

activities taking place, such as accounting and the opening and sealing of papyri, boxes, ceramic jars, and other commodities.

The 2007 season of the Tell Edfu Project took place from the 3rd of October until the 1st of November 2007. The members of the mission were Natasha Ayers (drawings and small finds), Barbara Böhm (pottery), Richard Bussmann (small finds), Georges Demidoff (Egyptology), Dominique Farout (ostraca and texts), Gregory Marouard (archaeology, Ptolemaic houses), Aurelie Schenk (archaeology), Jane Smythe (pottery), and Nico Staring (archaeology). The SCA inspector has been Osama Ismail Ahmed.

Silo Area

One of the main tasks for this season was to find the limits of the large silo court discovered during the previous seasons (fig. 2). A large amount of rubbish and debris, almost three meters thick, covering the archaeological remains south and east of the silos discovered in previous years, has been removed. This layer of debris turned out to be much thicker than previously thought and was left mainly by the former French excavations and the *sebbakhin*, a fact confirmed by various finds such as some pages of an Arabic newspaper from 1914. The pottery coming from these layers was carefully checked for its date but turned out to be of very mixed periods, mainly Coptic and Roman. Numerous grinding implements of various hard stones such as red granite were also found here, left by the former excavations and without context. They were recorded and added to the catalog of small finds. In the east of the silo area we were finally able to reach some undisturbed occupation levels which had been cut into by the *sebbakhin*, leaving some holes but much of the stratigraphy still intact. The precise excavation and study of these remains, which seem to belong to numerous buildings, will be carried out next season. We also identified several stratigraphic sequences that are still in situ and linked to the large ash layer as well as the square storage compartments covering much of this area. One of the main problems with dating these remains so far has been the total lack of intact stratigraphy because of the French excavations in the 1930s. In the south, the eastern half of Silo 393 was discovered, as well as a new silo (Si 502) in the same alignment as the previous ones. This one is founded on a much higher level but shows the same architectural features as Silos 405 and 393. In parts only one course of mudbricks has been preserved. The corner of some mudbrick walls was excavated southeast of Silo 502 and this corner seems to be the only remaining part of the original enclosure wall of the silo courtyard (fig. 3). This needs also to be studied

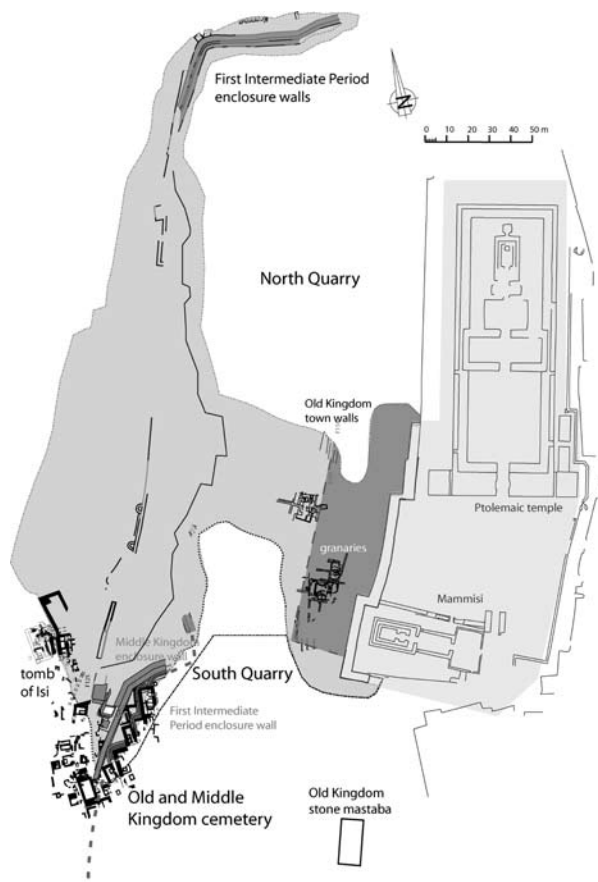


Figure 1. General plan of Tell Edfu

in further depth next season, but it seems almost certain that Silo 502 is the last silo of this storage installation in the south.

Furthermore, the long north–south wall running west of the silos (Wall 300) was investigated and cleared in order to clarify its different architectural features. It is clear that it had been in use for a long time and was frequently rebuilt. One of these phases is contemporary with the silos, which means we can identify it as the western enclosure wall. Additionally, the clearance of the sand and debris layers just next to this wall led to the discovery of further elements of the Old Kingdom enclosure walls (fig. 4), clearly visible in the southeastern part of the North Quarry as well as in the northeast corner of the South Quarry (see fig. 1).

Columned Hall

Another aim of this season was the excavation of the thick mud floor belonging to the columned hall of the late Middle Kingdom (figs. 2 and 5). The compact mud floor with its five sandstone column bases preserved in situ was excavated this season. Last season we were able to reconstruct a columned hall with sixteen wooden columns belonging to the administrative center of the town. The floor associated with this building consists of a multitude of sub-floor phases. The last layer of occupation, which lies directly on top of the thick mud floor, is characterized by a large quantity of broken pottery and animal bones (fig. 6) that seem to correspond to the last phase of activity within this structure before its abandonment. Several layers of the mud floor were excavated until we reached a phase that showed numerous holes in the floor, most of which were still covered by a later floor phase (fig. 7). The holes were carefully cleared of their contents and turned out to be quite shallow, ca. 5–8 cm deep \times 15–20 cm in diameter. They were filled with broken pieces of Middle Kingdom drinking cups as well as seal impressions and organic remains. Several new seal impression motifs have been found, one of which shows the king wearing the crown of Upper and Lower Egypt with a tiny cartouche in front of him (fig. 8). It is most likely Amenemhat III; research is in progress. Others show spiral ornaments and signs typical for the period between the end of the Twelfth and the early Thirteenth Dynasty. The arrangement of these holes seems to follow a regular pattern and the sides of the holes show impressions left by heavy objects pressing down on the surface. These observations seem to exclude their possible function as postholes and suggest that they were used to place large pottery jars. Close parallels have been found at Buhen, where comparable holes were

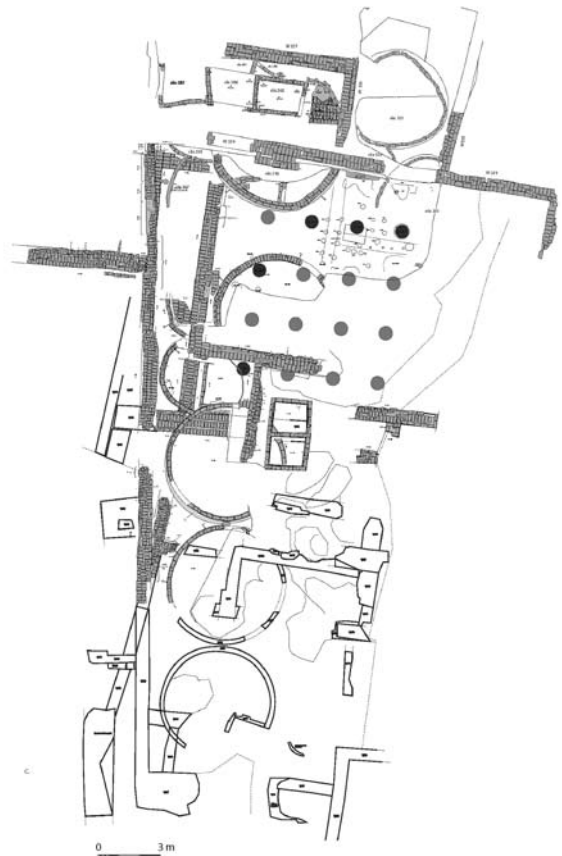


Figure 2. Preliminary plan of silo area and columned hall at Tell Edfu

discovered in the floor of the Commander's Building. Here, the base of a round jar was found in situ in one of the holes.

When a new floor was added on top, these holes were completely covered and invisible in the later phases of the columned hall. It is quite likely that the use of the columned hall as administrative center, which has been well confirmed by the associated finds, stretched over a considerable amount of time, extending back into the earlier Twelfth Dynasty, a fact that can be confirmed by the ceramic analysis.

Study and Cleaning of Ptolemaic Houses

This season, eight domestic buildings dating to the Ptolemaic and Roman periods along the western part of the tell were partially cleaned by Gregory Marouard in order to clarify their architectural features and details. A comparison was made with the already published information from the excavations in the 1930s, when this area of the tell was excavated by the Franco-Polish mission. It turned out that the publication of the plans of the houses are to some extent lacking precision, especially with regard to the details of the mudbrick walls and vaults, which have been very sketchily documented and are therefore missing many important details. The excellent state of preservation of these houses and the insufficiency of the accuracy in the publications justifies a more detailed study in the future.

Small Finds

During the 2007 season, analysis and drawing of material from the 2005 and 2006 seasons was carried out by Natasha Ayers and Richard Bussmann. Most of the finds excavated this season came from the rubbish layer, context 2218. A large number of stones (grinding stones, worked stone, etc.) also came from the same layer. The ostraca analyzed and photographed this year are also mostly from context 2218. Thirteen new ostraca have been recovered; most are Demotic, but



Figure 3. Silo 502 and the corner of the silo court enclosure wall



Figure 4. Parts of the Old Kingdom enclosure wall on the surface

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some are inscribed with Coptic texts. Two very small pieces of hieratic ostraca were found in the area of the columned hall, one inside the mud floor. Their texts were copied in detail for further translation. Jar stoppers and net sinkers constitute the majority of the small finds recovered this year. Seal impressions were recovered from the holes in the floor of the columned hall. A variety of designs that are typical of the late Twelfth and early Thirteenth Dynasties are present. All were described and photographed.

Pottery

Analysis and recording of all pottery sherds continued during the third season of work at Tell Edfu. Preliminary analysis of the pottery material from the past two seasons was completed. A total of 200 contexts containing these potsherds were analyzed; we were able to produce preliminary dates for 122 of these contexts.

From each of the contexts a number of diagnostic sherds were separated for recording and further fabric description. Technical drawing and fabric description was conducted in the field by Jane Smythe, Barbara Böhm, and Nico Staring. A total of twenty-five contexts were completed with preliminary dates given; these will be the focus of further study and dating refinement. A number of imported pottery has also been found within various contexts, including a Mycenaean ware from context 2224 that can be clearly dated to the New Kingdom. Levantine/Canaanite fabrics have also been documented. As expected, there are also significant amounts of Nubian pottery sherds coming from the Middle Kingdom layers. All imported fabrics have been kept for future analysis by specialists. It is hoped that work will continue in the following seasons with the aim to complete the drawings and analysis of the remaining and future contexts that come from the tell.

The next season at Tell Edfu will focus on further study of the granary courtyard and the columned hall by extending the excavation area toward the north and east. Ancient Egyptian administration is mainly known from texts, but the full understanding of the institutions involved



Figure 5. The columned hall showing thick mud floor and the discovered holes



Figure 6. Last layer of occupation of the columned hall



Figure 7. Holes in the mud floor of the columned hall



Figure 8. Seal impressions of the Twelfth Dynasty showing the king wearing the crown of Upper and Lower Egypt

and their role within towns and cities has been so far difficult to grasp because of the lack of archaeological evidence with which textual data needs to be combined.

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