

The Earliest Pharaohs and The University Museum

Old and New Excavations: 1900-1987

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Although the detailed discussion of a significant ancient art work or archaeological artifact can in itself be a fascinating exercise, in this essay I should like to focus on a major collection. This collection of artifacts from Early Dynastic royal tombs is certainly amongst the most important within The University Museum's general Egyptian holdings of over 88,000 objects, for most of the objects within it come from the tombs of Egypt's earliest pharaohs, the first to be documented by both texts and archaeology. There were earlier rulers who bore royal titles, but they are known to us chiefly through later Egyptian tradition. The specific burial places of most have never been securely identified and, since many existed before writing was in use, probably never will be. In any case, it is under these earliest historic pharaohs, the rulers of the First and Second Dynasties, that Egyptian culture reached a new plateau of achievement—in writing, architecture, the arts, technology, and social organization—and The University Museum is fortunate in having so many objects produced during this vital period in Egyptian history. The Museum's collection of material from the Early Dynastic royal tombs is certainly the finest in the United States, and compares favorably with other major holdings of similar objects in Cairo, Paris, and London.

A discussion of the relics of these earliest pharaohs is especially appropriate in the Museum's Centennial year, for the material is not only of great intrinsic interest, it also carries us back to the days when the Museum's energetic founders were developing major collections from several famous cultures and simultaneously linking the Museum with leading archaeologists of that time. It further brings us up to the present day, for last year (1986) the combined expedition of The University Museum and Yale University to Abydos in southern Egypt initiated a new field project, exploring some of the important questions that remain to be answered about the monuments of Egypt's earliest historic kings.

Table 1

A Chronology of Pre- and Early Dynastic Egypt

Predynastic Period (Upper Egypt)	
Badarian	ca. 4800-4200 B.C.
Nagada I	ca. 4200-3700 B.C.
Nagada II	ca. 3700-3250 B.C.
Nagada III	ca. 3250-3100 B.C.

Archaic Period

Dynasty I	ca. 3100-2900 B.C.
Dynasty II	ca. 2900-2740 B.C.

Old Kingdom

Dynasty III	ca. 2740-2680 B.C.
Dynasty IV	ca. 2680-2540 B.C.
Dynasty V	ca. 2540-2400 B.C.
Dynasty VI	ca. 2400-ca. 2250 B.C.

The Royal Tombs of Abydos

Abydos is an enormous site. Cemetery fields, temple ruins, and buried settlements sprawl over some 8 square kilometers of low-lying desert adjoining the river plain (Figs. 1-2). Far to the rear of the site, almost at the foot of the steep cliffs that form a curving bay around the site, is a comparatively inconspicuous area of ruins, locally long known as Umm el Qa'ab —'the mother of little pots'—because of the vast amounts of broken pottery covering them. While the site had been repeatedly disturbed in the past, the first 'excavation' of these ruins was by Amélineau, an archaeological speculator, in 1895-1897. Having "scandalously misconducted" the excavation (Drower 1985:251), Amélineau planned to sell off the material allotted him. In order to protect the market value of his finds, he smashed duplicated material on the site.

Other scholars realized that what Amélineau had discovered were the royal tombs of the earliest dynasties of Egypt (he thought they antedated the First Dynasty), and the site was rescued by Petrie's follow-up excavations in 1900 and 1901. Additional historical and architectural details still remain to be recovered, as a new German initiative (since 1977) at re-excavating Umm el Qa'ab has shown. Nevertheless, it is still Petrie's work that provides our fullest picture of the royal tombs and the



1 View of northern Abydos from the riverplain: foreground, the north cemetery; on the left, the shallow valley leading up to Umm el Qa'ab. The Pennsylvania-Yale Expedition house is in the center left and further on, left of the house, is the site of the Early Dynastic Royal Tombs.

brilliant 'court-culture' that produced them. The inscriptions he and Amélineau recovered showed that every king of the First Dynasty had a tomb at Umm el Qa'ab, as did two rulers of the late Second Dynasty, Peribsen and Khasekhemwy.

Architecture of the First and Second Dynasty Tombs

Throughout the First Dynasty the basic royal tomb type was a large, open pit, lined and subdivided by mud-brick walls and roofed with sturdy timbers (Fig. 3). An access stairway was introduced early in the dynasty. The earliest tomb of interest here (B17 and B18 on Fig. 4) has now been identified as belonging to Narmer by the German scholars Kaiser and Dreyer (1982). Narmer is often considered the first ruler to unify Egypt, based on the scenes shown on his ceremonial slate palette from Hierakonpolis (Fig. 5). Narmer(?)'s tomb was small at about 50 square meters, but that of the next pharaoh, Aha, was much larger at 394 square meters and consisted of 3 separate brick-lined pits (B10, 15, and 19 on Fig. 4; Kaiser and Dreyer 1982). The remaining tombs are of similar scale but of ever increasing complexity. At the end of the dynasty, pharaoh Qaa's tomb of ca. 384 square meters was subdivided into 13 chambers. The evolution of

the Second Dynasty royal tombs cannot be traced, as most of its earlier rulers were apparently buried at Saqqara in as yet largely unexcavated tombs; however, the last in the series, that of pharaoh Khasekhemwy, is at Abydos and is strikingly large and complex. Its chambers cover over 1000 square meters, about a quarter of an acre.

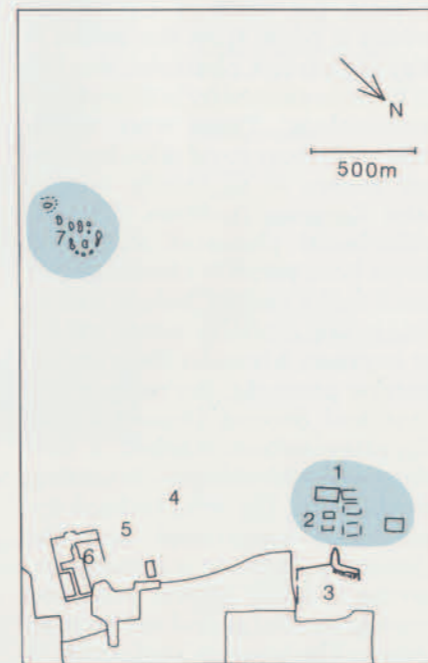
The superstructures of these tombs were mostly or entirely denuded, making reconstruction difficult (Fig. 7). Aha's tomb may have had a large but simple sand



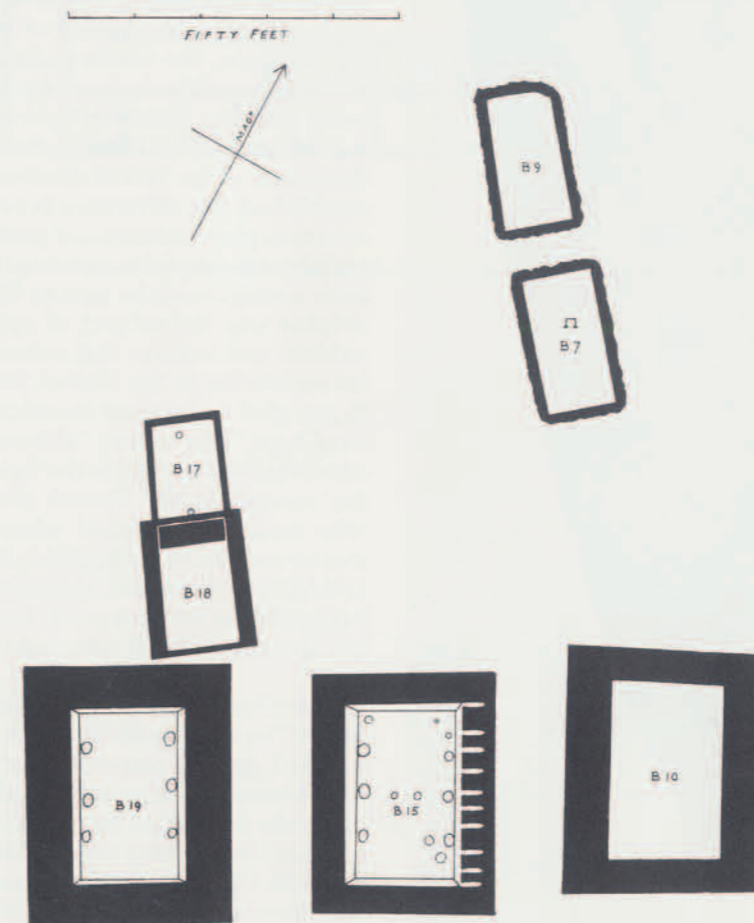
2 Map showing location of Abydos. Detail: 1. Funerary enclosures of the First and Second Dynasties (shaded area), including the Shunet el Zebib. 2. "North Cemetery." 3. Osiris temple enclosure. 4. "Middle Cemetery." 5. "South Cemetery." 6. Temple of Seti I. 7. Umm el Qa'ab: royal tombs of the First and Second Dynasties (shaded area).

mound above the burial chamber. Later superstructures are usually assumed to have been low (3-meter?), solid, square masses, consisting of brick-walled enclosures filled with rubble, but recent work indicates that the superstructures may have been even lower and more modest (Kaiser 1981:247ff.; Kaiser and Dreyer 1982:216-217, 250). Certainly, the Abydos tombs did not have the large, elaborately niched 'palace-facade' superstructures of contemporary tombs at Saqqara (Fig. 16). The latter continue to be identified by some scholars as the 'real' royal tombs, and in this view the monuments at Abydos were cenotaphs or dummy tombs. But certain unique attributes of the Abydos tombs (for example, the royal funerary stelae, not found at Saqqara) show they are indeed the only royal tombs in the First and late Second Dynasties (Kemp 1966, 1967).

Petrie found that the underlying tomb chambers at Abydos had been repeatedly disturbed. Their wooden roofs and inner linings or chambers had been burnt in early times, and plundering (including Amélineau's) had been frequent. Some tombs



3 One of the royal tombs at Umm el Qa'ab in 1967. After the 1900-1901 excavation the tombs refilled with debris, but the sides of the open pit, and its massive mud-bricked lining, can still be seen.



4 Umm el Qa'ab; plans of the tombs of Narmer (B17 and B18) and Aha (B10, B15, and B19) at the opening of the First Dynasty. (From Petrie 1901:pl. 59)

had been partially refurbished in the 2nd and 1st millennia B.C. for religious reasons. Thus, in excavating pharaoh Den's tomb, Petrie found it had once contained "a great number of tablets of ivory and ebony"—tablets or labels bearing some of Egypt's earliest annalistic records (see below). Fragments of 18 had been overlooked by Amélineau's workers and were found in his spoil heaps, and an intact example had been stolen while Amélineau's excavations were in progress (Petrie 1900:11). In Den's tomb, the resins and ointments (presumably stored in many stone vessels) had melted and run out during the fiery destruction of the tomb chamber. The oil vessels themselves were entirely absent, perhaps removed during a restoration of the tomb by pharaoh Amasis, who ruled almost 2500 years after Den's death! (Petrie 1901:10).

Despite these misadventures, a rich variety of artifacts, intact or fragmentary, survived to provide glimpses into Early Dynastic culture, and many are now in The University Museum. Examples of Egypt's earliest written documents include stelae of royal women and courtiers from subsidiary tombs around the royal graves. The advanced state of technology is shown by stone vases that are often beautifully carved; containers and implements in copper; and dozens of fragments of exquisitely carved ivory objects, as well as inlays for well-shaped wooden furniture. Typical of the artistic quality is a cosmetic dish in ivory, in the form of a charmingly rendered duck. Not from a royal but rather from an elite tomb at Abydos (M1), it was found "close to our house," says Petrie, "and . . . by accident" (1900:28).

Flinders Petrie and The University Museum

Petrie and his organizational backers in England were extremely generous in allotting materials from the royal tombs of Abydos to The University Museum, and the artistic quality or historical interest of much is outstanding, as we shall see below. The other important collections of Early Dynastic

royal tomb material in the United States, at the Metropolitan Museum of New York, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Brooklyn Museum, and The Oriental Institute Museum of Chicago, are either not as rich or not as representative. Why the Museum was so fortunate evokes a fascinating episode in its history: the collaboration between Sara York Stevenson, first curator of the Egyptian and

Mediterranean collections, and Flinders Petrie, the founder of scientific archaeology in Egypt (Fig. 8).

This collaboration has been described elsewhere (O'Connor and Silverman 1979:13-19, 34), and is vividly documented in numerous letters between Petrie and Stevenson in The University Museum Archives (UMA). Petrie had started to receive financial support from the nascent

Museum in 1890, and had sent it significant excavated material since that date, but his relationship with Mrs. Stevenson in particular was close. Compared with the difficulties and misunderstandings he often encountered with colleagues in England (described in a recent and splendid biography by Drower, 1985), Mrs. Stevenson was a lady after his own heart. She was dedicated to building up an Egyptian collection of first-rate, scientifically excavated material; she was very well read in historical and archaeological scholarship; and she habitually sent Petrie larger funds than he requested. At one point Petrie rather archly wrote to her, "You seem to take a naughty pleasure in putting me into difficulties to adequately compensate your generosity" (May 17, 1984; UMA). Mrs. Stevenson's scholarly zest and educational dedication clearly attracted Petrie, and she adroitly involved him emotionally in the building up of the Museum's collection. In August of 1892, for example, she wrote to him, "I wish you would take us under your wing and take a fatherly interest in our Museum." In 1896(?) she said that some of his recent discoveries established "the difference between common place science and genius," and she was careful to point out that each consignment he sent to Philadelphia was the subject of special exhibits and lectures that enhanced his reputation in the United States. "I am glad to be your mouthpiece over here," she wrote, "although I often think of myself in the light of the servant in the French play—who invariably sneezed when his master took snuff!" (August 1, 1896; UMA). Mrs. Stevenson's humor was evidently yet another asset, for Petrie also appreciated witticisms and jokes.

The effects of what Petrie himself called "an old friendship with one whom I greatly respected for her whole-hearted and unselfish dedication to the subject [of Egyptian archaeology] for so many years" (March 17, 1909; UMA) persisted long after Mrs. Stevenson herself left the Museum in 1905. Petrie continued a productive relationship with the Museum under its director George Gordon, sending it in 1913 the superb granite sphinx now displayed in the Lower



5
The ceremonial slate palette of pharaoh Narmer, from Hierakonpolis. The scenes are believed by some to refer to the first national unification of Egypt under a single pharaoh.

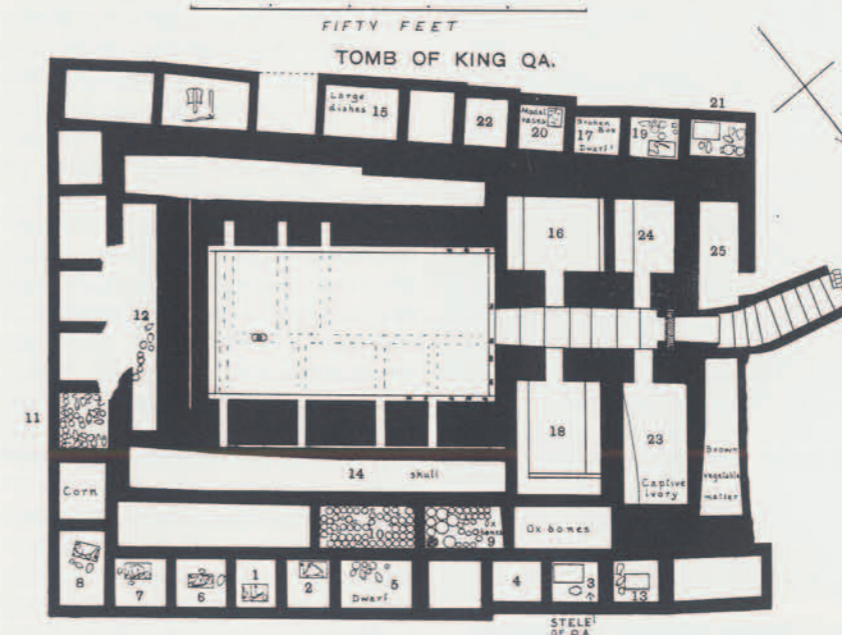
Egyptian Gallery, and in February 1914 offering Gordon first option to buy half of the fabulous Lahun jewelry which had only just been discovered (Drower 1985:327-329). The letter from the excavation site at Lahun opened dramatically: "... keep this letter strictly private till the summer. . . . please to avoid

even mentioning or suggesting my *name* or the *place*. I am obliged to ask this for the sake of our personal safety, and that of our work"; but in the event it was the Metropolitan Museum, not The University Museum, that bought the treasure (Drower 1985:333). Petrie's long relationship with the Museum ended

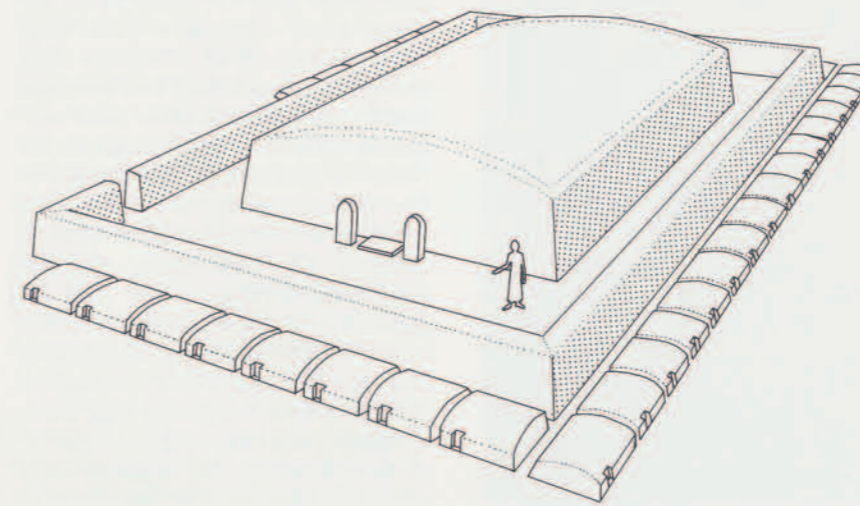
on a sour note in 1916, in a dispute with Gordon about a concession at Memphis.

Egypt's Earliest Civilization

The riches held by the Museum from the Early Dynastic royal tombs are so many that we must highlight them by focusing on a few particularly outstanding items, noting their cultural significance and sometimes a special association with Petrie or Stevenson. One of the earliest and most striking objects is a large alabaster jar (27.5



6
Plan of the tomb of pharaoh Qaa at the end of the First Dynasty. (After Petrie 1900:pl. 60)



7
A reconstruction of the original appearance of a First Dynasty royal tomb at Abydos. The main superstructure stands over the royal burial chamber; two stelae mark an offering place. Around the enclosure wall are the superstructures of pit tombs, subsidiary burials of members of the royal court.



8
Flinders Petrie (drawn by the author) and Sara York Stevenson (UM neg. 133978).

cm high) of cylindrical shape, found in one of the subsidiary tombs associated with the tomb of pharaoh Aha (Petrie 1901:19; see Kaiser and Dreyer 1982:237 no. pp). The jar bears the 'Horus-name' of pharaoh Narmer (Fig. 9), the owner of the Hierakonpolis slate palette, and probably the predecessor (and father?) of Aha.

The history and succession of the earliest pharaohs (i.e., the First and Second Dynasties) were in fact virtually unknown prior to the discoveries of Petrie, Amélineau, and a few others. By 1897 it was realized that Amélineau's material included the names of at least three early kings, hitherto known only from later king-lists and corrupt historical traditions. It was Petrie who worked out the full chronology of both dynasties in a fascinating display of archaeological sensitivity and powerful logic (Petrie 1900:4-6; 1901:3-6). The latter is not surprising in someone described as "one of the great applied mathematicians of the 19th century" (Kendall 1971:214), while the former required the correlating of scores of often minute

details. Soon after the first season Petrie wrote to Mrs. Stevenson that he had "made out the history [of the royal tombs], mainly from three almost illegible rough black mud sealings," and promptly listed most of the kings in an order that is still accepted (May 23, 1900; UMA). His observations on the Narmer vase typify the way in which such details enabled the chronology to be gradually built up. The "deeply curved top" of the frame around the royal name, he noted, "is usual under Narmer. . . and is never seen under later kings" (Petrie 1901:19).

Dated to the late First Dynasty is an unusually important item, the funerary stela bearing the Horus-name of pharaoh Qaa (Fig. 10). Two such stelae stood before each tomb, so within the First Dynasty there were originally 16, or 2 for each of the known rulers. Only 5 stelae have been recovered, and of these the Qaa stela is one of the best preserved. Three-quarters complete, 1.43 meters high, and powerfully carved in a hard black stone, the Qaa stela is surpassed amongst First Dynasty pharaohs' stelae only

by the more finely carved example belonging to pharaoh Djnet, now in the Louvre Museum. In addition, two stelae of a queen, Merytneit, and several commemorating two Second Dynasty rulers are known.

One very important aspect of the recovery of the Qaa stela and fragments from stelae of pharaoh Semerkhet is that they provide the only evidence for the original placement of such monuments. Petrie recorded that the Qaa stela was found lying over a chamber of the tomb, but "on the ground level at the east side [of the tomb]." "[N]ear it, on the south, were dozens of large pieces of fine alabaster bowls, and one of diorite with the inscription for the 'priest of the temple of King Qa', indicating "that the shrine of offerings for Qa was probably on this side" (Petrie 1900:6, 15). Thus the positions of stela and bowls suggest that the Qaa stela was apparently approximately in situ, on the east side of the tomb's superstructure.

In 1900 the Qaa stela precipitated a crisis vividly evoked in the Petrie-Stevenson correspondence. The custom was that finds allotted to Petrie by the Cairo Museum were subdivided in England amongst his various sponsors, including American ones, by a committee of the Egypt Exploration Fund. The Egyptian Department of the British Museum normally shared in the subdivision, and Petrie had for many years enjoyed good relations with its staff (Drower 1985:26, 43, 67-69). By 1886, however, he and they had become hostile toward each other, and continued to be so throughout his career (Drower 1985:105). One can therefore understand Petrie's indignation when he wrote to Mrs. Stevenson on October 20, 1900, that after the Egypt Exploration Fund had assigned the Qaa stela, as well as other items, to Philadelphia, the British Museum had borrowed it to make a cast, and now suggested that since "Philadelphia has come out so well" in the division, the original stela should be kept at the British Museum and the cast sent to Philadelphia!

This "unfairness," "rudeness and false play" provoked the warm-hearted and impulsive Petrie to a splendid outburst of invective directed, we must remember, not against

the British Museum as a whole but rather its Egyptian and Greek departments. The British Museum, he wrote, "has become of late years really an obscurantist institution, standing in its own light and in other people's. The whole prehistoric discoveries of Egypt [Petrie's work] are ignored. . . . The whole of the Mykenaeen dating [also worked out by Petrie], accepted by everyone else, is repudiated, and no one in the Greek Department is allowed to say that anything is older than 700 or 800 B.C. . . . Along with this fusty folly goes an outstanding arrogance and rudeness." Petrie suggested to Mrs. Stevenson that if the Fund did not support him in this dispute, he might work only for its American branch, and *all* his finds would therefore go to U.S. institutions, especially The University Museum.

Mrs. Stevenson had been upset by the apparent chicanery, but this last suggestion delighted her; she had "lived as in a dream" since receiving it, she wrote to Petrie (undated draft). The excitement raged on until December 30, 1900, when Petrie sheepishly wrote to say the whole furor was due to a misunderstanding caused by an error of his, and no one was trying to unfairly hold back the Qaa stela. Nevertheless, he never lost his suspicion of the Egyptologists at the British Museum. Mrs. Stevenson had realized since July of 1897 that Petrie's advocacy was the main reason why Philadelphia did well in divisions. That summer (1897) she met the Egypt Exploration Fund committee in London and wrote back: "They are very conceited here—know nothing about our work in Philadelphia but are ready enough to use us and our money. The general feeling towards Americans is not friendly just now—but they have done their best to be nice to me of course. I however feel it with my antennae" (July 1897; UMA).

Along with the Qaa stela, Petrie assigned to The University Museum a number of labels or docketts that, although quite small, are of extraordinary importance. These items are comparatively rare and they are confined to only a few museums; they include some of the earliest historical records to have survived from anywhere in the world. Two

A Whiff of the Past

Aromatic oils, often processed from the berries or resin of trees, formed a large proportion of the materials deposited in the royal tombs, as shown by labels, inscriptions on jars, and other evidence. It has even been suggested that oils—valuable, durable, and easily transportable—might have been one of the few items upon which a national tax was levied in Early Dynastic times (Kaplony 1963, 1:296). During the succeeding Old Kingdom, a wide variety of items came to be taxed.

Petrie himself found startling evidence for the lavish use of aromatic oils in the entrance ramp leading down into the tomb of pharaoh Semerkhet at Abydos. The ramp had been (partially?) filled "to three feet deep with sand saturated with ointment" (oil is the more likely medium); "hundred weights of it must have been poured here, and the scent was so strong in cutting away this sand that it could be smelt over the whole tomb" (Petrie 1900: 4).

exceptionally well preserved examples deserve comment.

The first (Fig. 11), measuring 9.4 by 7.0 centimeters, is amongst the

largest known; most were 5 by 5 centimeters or less. Made of ebony, a rare wood imported from the Sudan, the label has an inscribed text picked out with red paint. It was found in two pieces: one lay in the tomb of Aha and bears his name; the second came from the adjacent tomb of Narmer. The label's purpose was to identify the contents of a container, so, like other examples, it is pierced in the upper right corner to facilitate attachment.

What is really important, however, is the description of the material concerned. In the lowermost line this is identified as a certain amount of oil of a type called 'fragrance of the god Horus'; this oil was obtained as a tax levied upon northern Egypt in a specific year of the reign of Aha. The year itself, as was the custom until the Second Dynasty, was identified by specific events that occurred in it, listed in the three registers above. Interpretations of these difficult early texts vary, but in this case the text apparently describes the making of a cult object and a royal visit to a temple (top register); other religious activity (second register); and finally the return of a sea-going expedition from Lebanon with a load of the highly desired, coniferous meru



9 Closeup of Narmer's name on a stone jar (UM no. E9510). The name is enclosed in a 'palace-facade' frame and surmounted by the dynastic falcon god Horus.



10 Funerary stela of pharaoh Qaa from his tomb at Umm el Qa'ab (UM no. E6878; H. 1.43 m).



11 Oil label of pharaoh Aha (UM no. E9396; 9.4 by 7.0 cm). (Photo: G. Daher)



12 Subsidiary burials of courtiers surrounding the First Dynasty grave rectangles at Abydos. (After Petrie 1925:pl. 13)

wood. Similar abbreviated narratives occur on other labels. A long inscription on the 'Palermo Stone' contains a list of every regnal year from (probably) the time of Narmer to that of Niuserre(?), who ruled nearly 700 years later. Each year is described in the same fashion as on the labels, showing that the latter reflect a kind of annalistic recording of history going back almost as far as the invention of Egyptian writing itself (Redford 1986:86-90, 130-136).

The other label is smaller; it is also later in date, exemplifying the layout and content typical on such items by the end of the First Dynasty. Made of ivory, it dates to pharaoh Qaa. Although it was found near the offering place on the east of his tomb (Petrie 1900:23), it may originally have been thrown up from the plundered tomb itself. By this time, the annalistic section of the inscribed text was reduced in content, and is framed by a year hieroglyph (curving at the top) on the right, and a vertical divider on the left. A "following of Horus," a royal event of uncertain nature, is referred to. In

the center of the label is found Qaa's name and perhaps that of a close relative (Kaplony 1963, 2:1009, no. 1615; a disputed interpretation). On the far left are the titles of an



13 Stela of Nefer, a member of the court from Abydos. His title, "dwarf," is represented by an abnormally short armed and legged man (UM no. E9186; H. 25 cm, W. 21.5 cm). (Photo: G. Daher)

official, a 'worker of the god Min of the town of Ipw [modern Akhmim in southern Egypt], and medjeh-official of the medjeh-officials of the king of southern Egypt' (adaptation of Kaplony 1963, 1:299-301; the exact translation of *medjeh* remains uncertain). Below, the official's name and the type of oil involved would have been provided on a now missing segment. Officials responsible for collecting oil are often named on such labels; they were concerned also with collecting wood for ship building, a natural combination since many of the oils came from trees (Kaplony 1963, 1:300-301). It is references like these that have enabled scholars to start reconstructing the earliest known system of pharaonic government.

The royal court itself is documented on, amongst other items, small stone stelae from the subsidiary tombs surrounding the royal ones (Fig. 12). Petrie sent many such to The University Museum, and they include a well-carved example naming "the dwarf Nefer" (Fig. 13), who with a like-named

peer had been buried near the tomb of pharaoh Semerkhet. Their actual skeletons were also recovered (Petrie 1900:13 and Pl. 60). Dwarfs, as well as Pygmies from areas south of Egypt, were popular at the royal court, and a number of Early Dynastic examples of burials of dwarfs exist.

The stelae reveal that the subsidiary tombs (which numbered as many as 338 for one pharaoh, Djer) were in general for palace officials, funerary priests, and women attached to the king. Some tomb owners, however, were less conventional: at least five royal hunting dogs had received separate burial, each with a stela bearing such evocative names as "the [beautifully?] tailed one" (Kaplony 1963, 1:375).

Grimly enough, some—perhaps many—of the court officials and women may have been dispatched at the time of the royal burial. Petrie was amongst the first to note evidence for this. In the tomb of pharaoh Qaa, for example, the use of imperfectly dried mud brick had often led to wall slippage, with displaced bricks sometimes resting against objects placed in subsidiary tombs. This led Petrie to conclude that the burials of court members "must have taken place all at once, immediately the king's tomb was built; and hence they must have been sacrificed at the funeral" (Petrie 1900:14).

A final object is more modest but of considerable interest. The royal tombs had originally been stocked with hundreds of stone bowls and jars, often very finely made. For the most part, only fragments of these were recovered, but many still bore incised inscriptions. Often, these simply carried the name and titles of the relevant king, presumably to mark their ownership, but some were different. The example shown in Figure 14, from a stone bowl in a rare quartz-like material, shows a panther-like creature, identified by the hieroglyphic text above as the goddess Mafdet. The goddess probably grasped in one paw a scepter (the head of which can be seen on the left), and she stands on a hieroglyphic group that reads "mistress of the house of life."

Mafdet is one of the earliest Egyptian deities known, and had a strange



14 Fragments of a crystal bowl depicting the goddess Mafdet, 'mistress of the House of Life' (UM no. E6865; H. 6.9 cm).

dual function. She is associated with punitive judgment, and appears—again in cat-like form—on another First Dynasty bowl, actually walking up a structure which has been identified as a combination of the devices used by torturers and hangmen. Her other function is epitomized on the bowl discussed here, for the "house of life" in its inscription refers to the royal eating and food storage areas in the palace that Mafdet was believed to protect against harmful creatures such as snakes, and probably supernatural evils as well. In fact, it has been suggested that Mafdet was embodied in the cats who patrolled these areas, and if so, perhaps this bowl was *theirs*, their milk or water bowl! The real explanation is probably more prosaic: a bowl dedicated to the cult of Mafdet perhaps?

Another link between Mafdet and Abydos is worth quoting. In 1938 the eminent Egyptologist Alan Gardiner discussed the nature of Mafdet in the sober pages of the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*. In conclusion, he tried to decide whether Mafdet was a mongoose (a famous snake-killer) or a feline, which is what she tends to look like in depictions of her. He decided on the latter, in part because of two ladies who were then living in a dig-house

at Abydos while they recorded the temple of Seti I at that site. "Miss Broome and Miss Calverly tell me," he wrote, "that their cat at Abydos killed several horned vipers [a deadly snake] by first pouncing upon them with her claws and then biting them" (Gardiner 1938:89-90). Mafdet revisiscent!

The 'Fortresses' of Abydos and the Pennsylvania-Yale Excavations

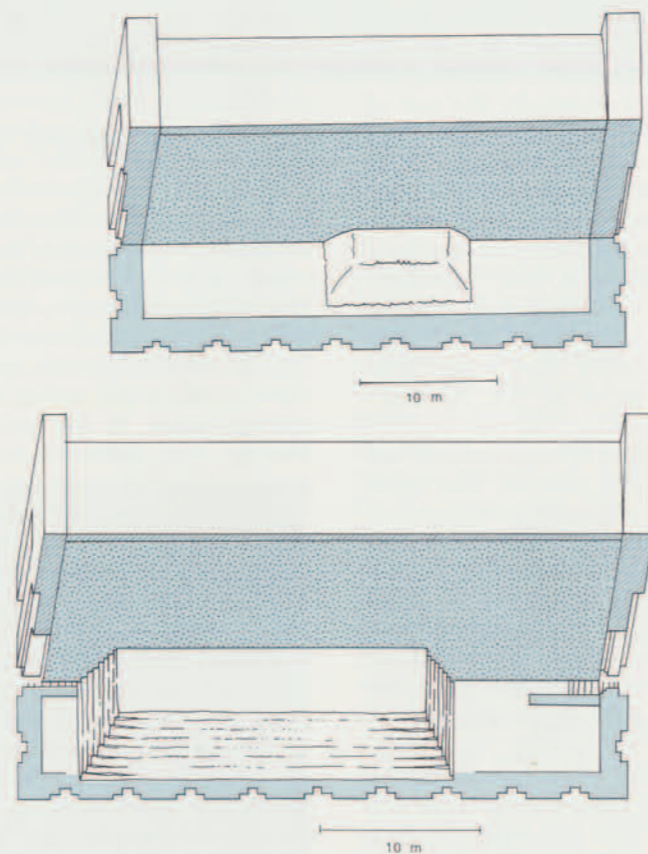
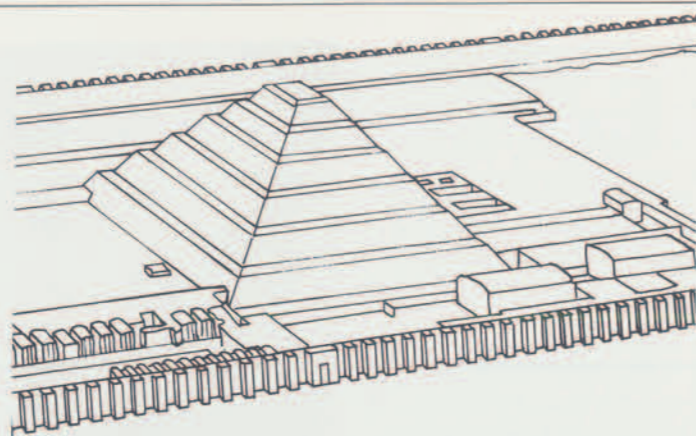
The early excavations of Petrie, Amélineau, and others did not answer all the questions that we can ask about Early Dynastic royal funerary complexes. In particular, these excavations did not provide enough data for us to trace the continuous evolution of the royal tomb type from the comparatively modest tombs of the First Dynasty pharaohs (Fig. 7) to the much larger, entirely stone-built Step Pyramid complex of pharaoh Djoser in the Third Dynasty (Fig. 15). From the latter, the true pyramid complex (pyramid, funerary temple, causeway, and valley temple) of the Old Kingdom and later clearly evolved, although that story is not yet fully

documented either.

Emery, excavator of the elite Early Dynastic tombs at Saqqara mentioned above, argued that these were the origin of the Step Pyramid complex. His argument rested on his discovery that within the rectangular superstructure—with niched 'palace-facade'—of these tombs was a brick-skinned mound built over the burial chamber; in one case, the mound even took the form of a high, stepped cube (Fig. 16). Over time, he hinted, the mound grew greater and rose above the level of the superstructure, which itself became hollow and extended outwards to become an enclosure wall (Emery 1961:142-146). This view is still favored by distinguished experts such as Stadelmann (1985:33-34). As noted above, however, there are good reasons for arguing that only the Abydos tombs are royal. Given this last premise, the so-called Fortresses of Abydos assume considerable importance, both for our understanding of the Abydos tombs and, potentially, for the evolution of the pyramid complex in general. The 'Fortresses' and related entities nearby lie on the low desert about 1.7 kilometers north of Umm el Qa'ab (the royal tomb site), between the latter and the flood plain, which is almost a kilometer further to the northeast. One of the two 'Fortresses' was discovered by early excavators to consist of a brick-walled rectangle that had been severely denuded. The other, immediately on its southeast, is not only larger—its double enclosure walls define an area of about 1 hectare or just under 2½ acres—but much better preserved. The massive brick walls of this structure, today called the Shunet el Zebib, still rise as high as 10 to 11 meters, about 36 feet (Figs. 17-18). Since 1904 this structure has been dated to pharaoh Khasekhemwy of the late Second Dynasty, and is therefore about 4700 years old. It is probably the oldest standing example of large-scale, monumental brick architecture in the world, in the sense that most of it has always remained free of engulfing sand or debris. The denuded enclosure dates to the time of Khasekhemwy's predecessor, Peribsen.

The Shunet had been explored with little result in the 19th century,

15 *The Step Pyramid of pharaoh Djoser, at Saqqara. The complex is built entirely of limestone. To the north (right of the pyramid) is the funerary temple complex fronted by a very large court, not clearly defined by excavation. On the east side of the pyramid are two large shrines, each with a court in front, while the southeast segment is occupied by shrines flanking another court. South of the pyramid is another open court. All these courts and buildings are believed to be associated with the rituals of kingship. The entire complex is surrounded by a stone wall, with towers projecting from its face.*



16 *Modified sectional views of two elite First Dynasty tombs from Saqqara. The pattern of the external niches has been simplified, and the brick-walled magazines or storage areas included in the superstructure of the upper tomb have been omitted. The full height of each superstructure has been restored. In each case, the internal mound had been built over the open pit burial chambers, and was subsequently totally concealed by the rectangular, brick-walled superstructures, filled solid with sand and gravel (stippled area). (Drawing by D. O'Connor and S. Iams)*

and in 1924, both it and Peribsen's monument were better but still comparatively superficially excavated by assistants of Petrie. In 1921-1922 Petrie himself worked in a contiguous area, attracted by the discovery of First Dynasty tombs there. He located the traces of two smaller brick enclosures, one with surrounding subsidiary graves, and both dated to the First Dynasty. To the northwest of these enclosures he found two sets of subsidiary graves, each set laid out to form a hollow rectangle, respectively of 1 hectare and about .75 hectare in area. These grave rectangles dated to pharaohs Djer and Den. No enclosure walls were found within the rectangles, but Petrie's excavation strategy may well have missed their denuded remains (Petrie 1925:1-3; Kemp 1966).

It has long been clear that none of the enclosures are fortresses, but otherwise debate continues about their functions. Generally, however, it is accepted that both they and the grave rectangles are funerary in nature and conceptually linked to the royal tombs of Umm el Qa'ab. The size and comparatively unique character of the enclosures (which are not found at Saqqara, the other supposedly royal tomb site) help to emphasize the royal status of the tombs. One especially intriguing suggestion is that the grave rectangles of Djer and Den may have had within them wooden rather than brick enclosure walls, and that every enclosure including the brick ones originally contained a complex of buildings in wood, matting, and mud plaster. In plan, the hypothesized complexes built of organic materials may have anticipated to varying degrees the complicated pattern of temples, shrines, and courts found around the Step Pyramid of Djoser (Kaiser 1969). The Shunet el Zebib, after all, antedates the Step Pyramid only by some 40 or 50 years, and the traces of such ephemeral structures may well have been missed by the early excavators, particularly as each entity was severely affected by intrusive later graves as well as denudation.

It is the enclosures that bring our story full cycle: the Pennsylvania-Yale Expedition to Abydos, co-directed by myself and William

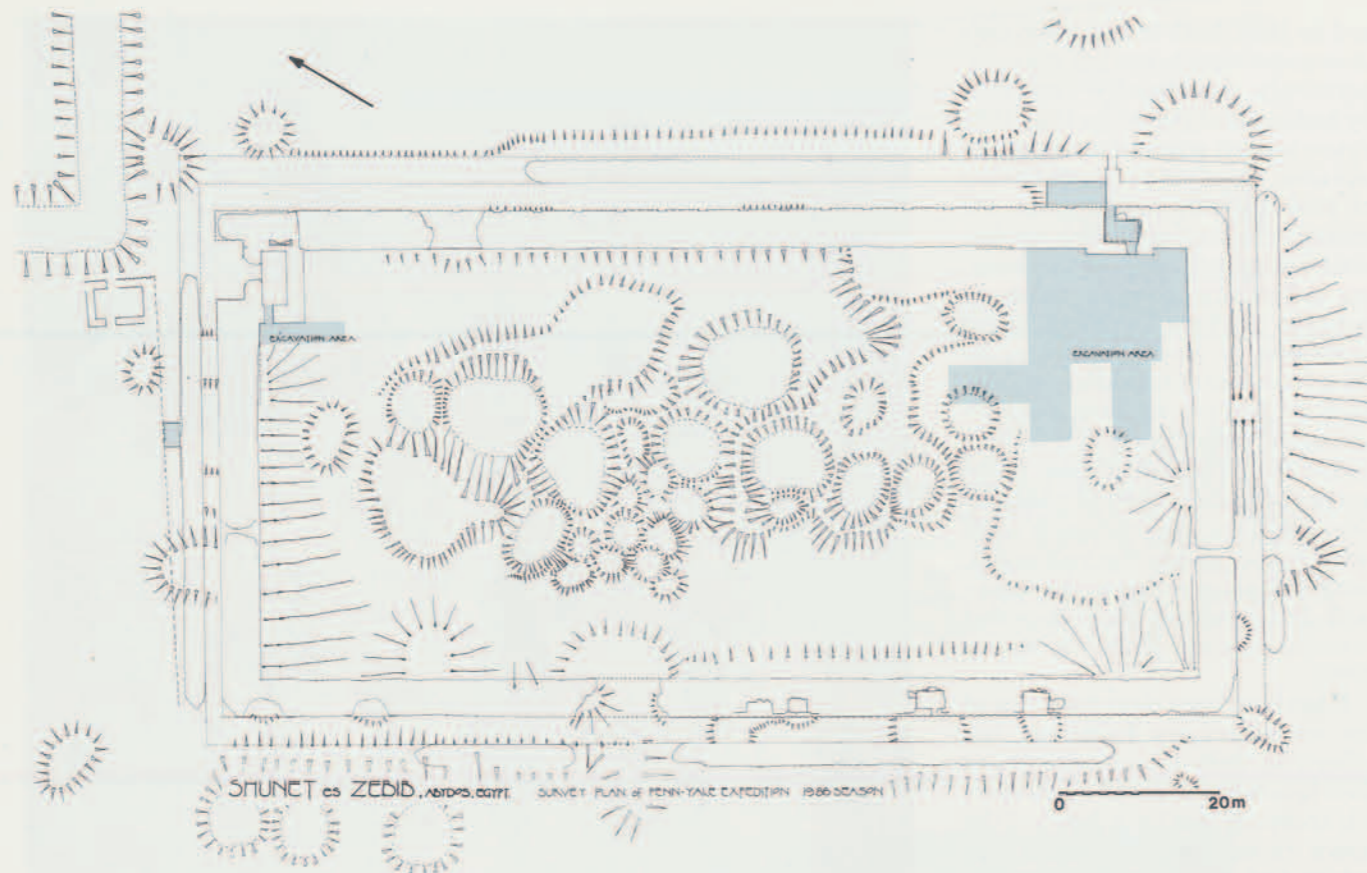


17 *The east wall of the Shunet el Zebib.*

Kelly Simpson of Yale University, has now initiated a project for the re-excavation and re-study of these important yet in many ways still enigmatic monuments. In February and March 1986 I directed a short but intense feasibility study of the Shunet, the Peribsen enclosure, and the Djer grave rectangle, and the results clearly justify the continuation of the project on an expanded scale. The results of this first season will be described in more detail elsewhere, but some of the most important are summarized here.

First, the Shunet wall itself was

resurveyed, and detailed plans and elevations were produced; these will be improved upon in the next season. Second, the interior of the Shunet was carefully mapped in order to locate the principal areas of earlier disturbance by the 19th and early 20th century excavations (Fig. 18). We now know that large areas remain comparatively undisturbed, and even the heavily pitted areas may yet preserve important information on the interstices between the pits. Third, excavations were undertaken. A substantially built brick building in the east corner had



18 Plan of the Shunet el Zebib, Pennsylvania-Yale Expedition, 1986. For the sake of clarity, the excavation grid and numerous spot-heights are omitted, as is the plan of the building in the east corner. Note the heavy pitting and mounding as a result of earlier 'excavations.' Shaded areas marked 'excavation' are those of the 1986 season.

been excavated in 1904, but the results were very summarily described. Nevertheless, the excavators had suggested that both the building and the Shunet as a whole had been built by pharaoh Khasekhemwy (two mud sealings bearing his name were cited as evidence), and that significant activity continued through the Third and Fourth Dynasties, and as late as Dynasty VI (Ayrton et al. 1904:3). In fact, a later (also poorly recorded) excavation yielded additional sealings of both Khasekhemwy and Djoser (Kaplony 1963, 1:163-166). The Second Dynasty date therefore seemed secure, even though the context of the sealings remained unclear. Our re-excavation of the front third of the building provided new information on both the date of construction and later use of the Shunet. From in situ debris in front of the building, Khasekhemwy sealings were recovered and for the first time were stratigraphically linked to the earliest

phase of the Shunet's history. Large quantities of pottery sherds were recovered, which dated only to the late Second and early Third Dynasties; activity in this area dating to the Fourth through Sixth Dynasties therefore remains unattested.

Excavations in the north corner were even more intriguing. Here a floor surface that apparently dates to the time of the Second Dynasty was located, and it may be possible to trace this surface throughout those parts of the enclosure not previously excavated. This early surface will undoubtedly be cut by pits filled with large deposits of sacred ibises, buried (often in jars) throughout the Shunet during the earlier 1st millennium B.C. Part of one such deposit was excavated last season, and others were encountered by earlier excavators. Nevertheless, much of the Second Dynasty surface, and hopefully traces of the structures that once stood on it, may well survive.



19 The denuded wall base that may be part of an enclosure built by pharaoh Djer.

Test excavations within the Peribsen enclosure revealed a situation very similar to that in the Shunet. Here, too, in situ material, including sealings, survived in association with an eastern building (also excavated earlier, see Ayrton et al. 1904:3), and

the desert surface upon which the enclosure walls were built could still be traced.

A small excavation within the southeast side of the Djer grave rectangle (an area certainly not tested by Petrie, who made a map of his sondages in this rectangle; Petrie 1925:2, Pl. 16) encountered another intriguing feature: the denuded base of a brick wall, located just about where an enclosure wall would be expected! If this wall

dates to the First Dynasty (and this remains possible but uncertain), then we have carried the history of these enclosures back earlier than had been proved hitherto.

The Museum's Early Dynastic collection has treasures and artifacts not only of First Dynasty pharaohs, but also of Khasekhemwy and Peribsen. Petrie sent us materials from the tombs of the two latter pharaohs at Umm el Qa'ab—most notably a small stone vase of Khasekhemwy

with its gold lid (imitating cloth tied on with string) still intact. We do not expect to recover artifacts as handsome as this or the others described above in our current excavations. What we do hope for, however, is to fulfill one of the principal goals of Petrie and his enthusiastic backer, Sara York Stevenson: the discovery of important new information about Egypt's earliest historic pharaohs and their contribution to Egyptian civilization as a whole. **Z**



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Dr. O'Connor has also co-curated with Dr. David Silverman several significant First Dynasty Museum exhibits, most recently *Ancient Egyptian Art and Archaeology*, seen by over two million visitors in Taiwan, and *Women in Ancient Egypt*, a Museum Centennial exhibit.

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