

Borrowed Legacy

Royal Tombs S9 and S10 at South Abydos

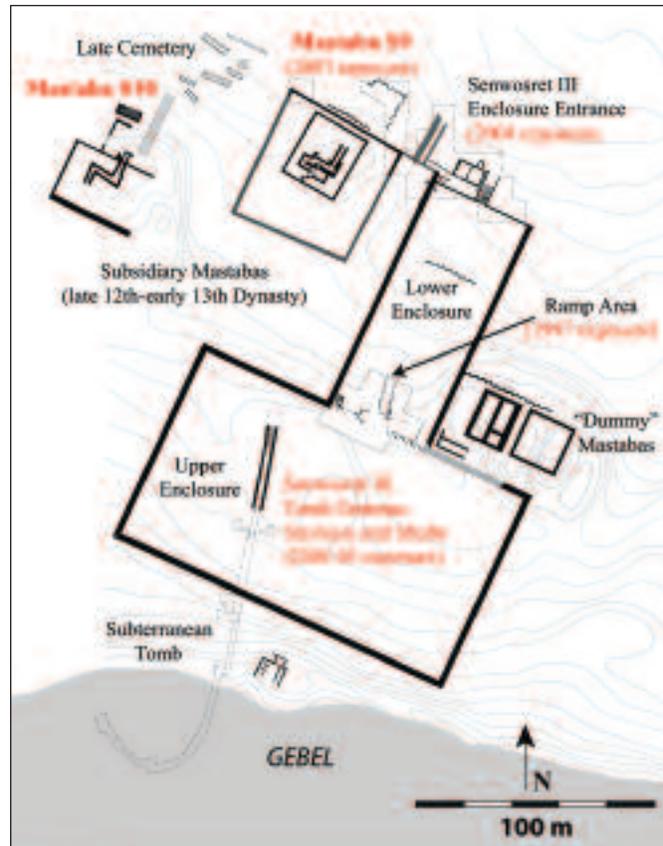
BY DAWN MCCORMACK

AFTER THE 12TH Dynasty reigns of Senwosret III (1878–1841 BCE) and Amenemhet III (1858–1812 BCE) the political and economic power of the Egyptian state began to decline. During the 13th Dynasty (1800–1650 BCE), over 50, often unrelated, pharaohs occupied the throne in little more than 150 years. Archaeologists have so far discovered only six of their tombs in the Memphite region near modern Cairo—two pyramids at South Saqqara, two pyramids at Mazghuna, and a funerary complex and a shaft tomb at Dahshur. Although these royal tombs feature a complex, subterranean design (first seen in Amenemhet III's complex at Hawara), they are significantly less magnificent than those from the height of the 12th Dynasty.

At South Abydos, to the north of Senwosret III's tomb, two structures known as S9 and S10 display the same architectural components as those found in the Memphite pyramids. In 1901–1902 Arthur Weigall was the first person to excavate tombs of this type. Although Ernest Mackay noticed in 1912 that S9's sarcophagus was almost identical to one from the southern pyramid at Mazghuna, subsequent scholars have not included S9 and S10 in their consideration of the royal funerary architecture of this period. In 2003, we re-excavated a portion of S9 to recover additional data that might shed light on its relationship to the Memphite tombs.

REVISITING S9 TO UNCOVER ITS SECRETS

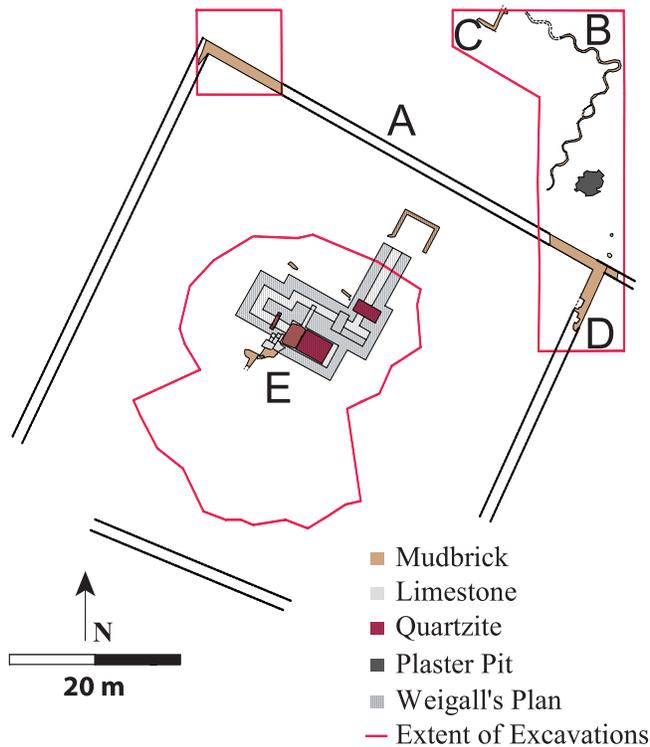
In at least one case, a preexisting Middle Kingdom royal funerary complex and its associated installations may have served as headquarters for later tomb construction during the 13th



Structures S9 and S10 are placed close to Senwosret III's tomb enclosure.

Dynasty (and possibly the late 12th Dynasty). The mortuary establishment of Senwosret III at South Abydos probably functioned in a similar manner for the building of S9 and S10. The proximity of these structures to Senwosret III's tomb is also significant because it symbolically links the reigns of the two later pharaohs to his legacy.

Near the cliffs of the *Mountain-of-Anubis* architects constructed S9 upon the natural terrain, which slopes noticeably



Plan of the 2003 excavations of S9, including Weigall's sketch of the sub-surface elements of the tomb. Recent work includes (A) the enclosure wall, (B) the sinusoidal wall, (C) the possible cult structure, (D) the blocked entrance, and (E) the sarcophagus chamber.

downward toward the northwest. Excavations and subsurface survey have revealed a mud-brick enclosure wall of uneven dimensions (averaging 54.5 m in length on each side) surrounding the subterranean tomb in the center. Weigall suggested that these walls were filled with sand and debris and then covered with a skin of bricks to form a mastaba (Arabic "bench") tomb, but he gave no evidence to support this interpretation. Comparable late Middle Kingdom structures are typically surmounted by a mud-brick pyramid encased in limestone, but no current evidence suggests that S9 had a pyramid. Could it be that the tomb simply used the natural pyramid of the *Mountain-of-Anubis*, as Senwosret III's tomb did, to cap it symbolically?

In front of the tomb enclosure to the northeast we uncovered a whitewashed, sinusoidal (wavy) mud-brick wall that may have formed an outer courtyard. These unusual walls, which also appear in Senwosret III's tomb enclosure, may have been tempo-

The sinusoidal wall of S9 is in the foreground, with a small section of the enclosure and the looming natural pyramid visible in the background.



Dawn McCollmack



The seemingly endless clean sand which filled the substructure of S9 after Weigall's excavations in 1901–1902 dwarfs the 50 workers attempting to remove it in 2003.

rary structures to keep sand away from construction areas, or they may have provided economical means (in both time and expense) of separating zones around the tomb enclosure. In at least one late Middle Kingdom funerary complex in the Memphite region such walls surrounded the entire complex.

Near the central axis of S9, the sinusoidal wall intersects with the east side of a rectangular building, represented today by a single course of bricks. The location of this structure on the same axis as the sarcophagus buried within the tomb enclosure suggests that it may have been a chapel for the cult of the pharaoh. It may also have provided sacred space for rituals during mummification and burial ceremonies. Unfortunately, the shallow nature of this building's remains does not provide further evidence about the activities which occurred here. The lack of debris from fallen walls may indicate this structure was razed soon after the funeral or that the site's downward-sloping terrain exposed its walls to the elements and to subsequent human activity.

Near the northeast corner of the main tomb enclosure we found a blocked entrance disguised to look like a part of the wall with a later layer of plaster and whitewash. Beneath this mud-brick plug, we discovered a distinct plaster floor which passed through the former entrance. After the doorway had been closed, a new floor had been created at a higher level. Unused sealing clay found nearby suggests that this area was used to administer pre-burial activities at the tomb. Interestingly, the opening in the enclosure wall and the possible cult building mentioned above are located in the same basic positions as similar structures at South Mazghuna.

Inside the tomb enclosure we encountered the crater Weigall had excavated during his search for the burial chamber. Re-excavating this area, we removed 5-6 m of sand before reaching the top section of the sarcophagus. During this work we found brick structures, not recorded by Weigall, that may have held back the sand from the burial pit or served as a platform to lower the large quartzite components of the sarcophagus. In comparable tomb structures topped by a pyramid such brickwork provides a foundation for arches that support the weight of the superstructure. Could this be evidence that S9 did have a superstructure?

A section of the quartzite sarcophagus became visible during our excavations.



One thing that did become clear during our excavations was the deliberate nature of the tomb's destruction. The body of the deceased and his funerary furnishings were smashed into tiny fragments. Burned bandages and small pieces of inscribed, gilded plaster that originally formed the mummy's mask and case lay strewn among the debris outside of the enclosure wall. We also found countless pieces of wood and faience inlays from unidentified funerary furniture, as well as fragments of stone jars, beads, and bone needles.

WHO BUILT S9 AND S10?

The reigns in which these structures were built remain a mystery. Although the architecture of S9 resembles that of South Mazghuna, the owner of that northern tomb is also unknown and thus does not provide insight into the identity of the pharaoh in S9. Similarly, while the remains of S10 can be compared to a tomb model discovered at Amenemhet III's abandoned funerary complex at Dahshur, this pharaoh's burial in his pyramid at Hawara precludes him from having been interred in S10. All that can be suggested at the moment is that S9 and S10 may have been constructed by pharaohs who reigned soon after Amenemhet III.

Leslie Warden and Kei Yamamoto patiently reconstruct pottery vessels from minute fragments that came from one of two small foundation deposits outside the enclosure wall. Other objects included rope, jar stoppers, and animal bones.

While the excavations at S9 and S10 have not yet revealed the identity of the pharaohs buried within these tombs, we hope that future excavations to fully explore them will provide some additional clues. Past researchers have often ignored late Middle Kingdom royal tombs, with their small size and wrecked condition, and new data is needed from these sites to further our understanding of the numerous royal figures and their circumstances during this perplexing era. 🏠



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For Further Reading

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