

# The Excitement of First Discovery

## *South Abydos 1899–1903*

BY KEI YAMAMOTO

**T**HE CURRENT EXPEDITION to South Abydos follows in the footsteps of earlier explorers and archaeologists. David Randall-MacIver, Arthur C. Mace, Arthur E. P. B. Weigall, and Charles T. Currelly undertook the first archaeological investigations in the area between 1899 and 1903 on behalf of their project director, the renowned Egyptologist, William Matthew Flinders Petrie. Before discussing our new research, it is important to recognize what went before.

### 1899–1900: DAVID RANDALL-MACIVER AND ARTHUR C. MACE

The mortuary complex of Senwosret III was first discovered late in 1899, when Randall-MacIver noticed a worked limestone block protruding from the ground. Expecting to find a small chapel, he had some men dig around it. It soon became apparent that the block was part of a doorway inside a fairly large temple dedicated to the Middle Kingdom pharaoh Senwosret III. The excavation of this temple (now known as *Beautiful-is-the-Ka*) occupied Randall-MacIver for the rest of the 1899–1900 field season.

At the same time, Randall-MacIver's teammate Mace began to excavate a pyramid located about 1 km to the south of Senwosret III's temple. Despite its relative proximity, however, they eventually realized that this pyramid was part of yet another large mortuary complex associated with a different pharaoh, the founder of the 18th Dynasty, Ahmose. That complex is now being investigated by Stephen P. Harvey of the University of Chicago.



Arthur Weigall on his camel "Laura."

### 1901–1902: ARTHUR E. P. B. WEIGALL

Two years later, Petrie had Weigall investigate the cemetery located about 1 km southwest of the temple of Senwosret III. Its main component was a great T-shaped enclosure, presumably associated with the same pharaoh. Weigall began by excavating the two prominent mud-brick structures standing in front of the enclosure. His aim was to discover the pharaoh's tomb, but he soon decided that these were "dummy" mastaba tombs since he could find no evidence of a burial. He turned his attention next to a small brick building behind the enclosure. Confident of finding the tomb entrance here, Weigall wrote home, "We are on the eve of a great discovery." All he found was disappointment.

Determined to find the tomb, he then began digging inside the enclosure itself. Many weeks passed as his workmen removed enormous amounts of sand from the enclosure's vast court. At the end of the season, they finally located the entrance of a subterranean tomb cut into the bedrock. That night armed robbers tried to break into the tomb, but Weigall and his most trusted workmen bravely fought them off.

The tomb was extensive and intricate, with many features concealing passages to the burial chamber which was hidden behind a wall. Weigall did find the sarcophagus of Senwosret III, but alas it had been completely robbed in ancient times! By season's end, Weigall had also unearthed a ritual purification house and two large, late Middle Kingdom mastabas adjacent to the T-shaped enclosure, but they left careful examination of the subterranean tomb for the following season.

#### 1902–1903: CHARLES T. CURRELLEY

After Weigall's promotion into the ranks of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, Currelley recorded the subterranean tomb. His teammate, Noel Rawnsley, describes the difficulty of this task in his memoir, *The Resurrection of Oldest Egypt*:

In the heart of them is a great devil's punch-bowl, a hollow whose sides are slopes of treacherous sand, with a single winding path, up which long lines of native boys pass the palm-leaf baskets filled with



Charles Currelley on an expedition in Egypt, 1903–1904. With permission of the Royal Ontario Museum © ROM.

rubbish. Deep, deep down in this hollow one sees the dark opening of a rock shaft leading to the tomb passage a quarter of a mile into the heart of the cliffs, where gangs of naked men toil and pant and sweat in the thick, hot air.

Despite such unfavorable working conditions, Currelley measured and mapped all the major architectural features and conducted a cursory study of the tomb's artifacts, including numerous fragments of extraordinarily fine calcite vessels. Late in this season, he also found and excavated several houses which form part of the town built in conjunction with the temple and the tomb, concluding the early archaeological research in this area.

#### CURRELLEY'S DIG HOUSE

When Currelley began work at South Abydos in January 1903, Petrie's main camp was located about 3 km away in North Abydos. Currelley therefore built a small hut for himself in South Abydos at the base of the cliffs above the tomb of Senwosret III.

In 2004, we excavated this hut to gain a better understanding of Currelley's work and his lifestyle in South Abydos. While conducting this "archaeology of archaeology," we recovered orange peels, fish bones, opened cans of food, pieces of fabric, buttons, a rubber shoe sole, and numerous pieces of paper. The latter included instructions for preparing cocoa, an English newspaper, a literary magazine, and an envelope postmarked at Alexandria. The most intriguing of all was a note written by Currelley to the main camp asking for more candles to be delivered, presumably to illuminate the work inside the tombs of Senwosret III and Ahmose. Apparently he never sent the note. The hearth inside the hut was still full of charcoal—the remains of Currelley's last fire at Abydos in April 1903. It looked as if he had left only a week before.

The author excavated the ruins of Currelley's small dig house in 2004.



Although the remains of their hasty excavations often hinder modern investigations, archaeologists today feel a sense of collaboration with our predecessors. Whereas these early excavators provide us with the basis for our own studies, our ongoing research continues to add information to advance our knowledge about the past. 🏠

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Kei Yamamoto in Currelly's hut.

#### For Further Reading

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# David Randall-MacIver *Explorer of Abydos and Curator of the Egyptian Section*

BY JENNIFER HOUSER WEGNER

AS A YOUNG man of 26, the British-born archaeologist and anthropologist David Randall-MacIver began his career working at Abydos as part of the Egypt Exploration Fund (EEF) expedition headed by Sir Flinders Petrie. In 1899–1900 Randall-MacIver discovered and investigated the mortuary temple of Senwosret III. To him goes the credit for initially identifying its royal owner. With Arthur Weigall and Charles Currelly, Randall-MacIver defined the basic elements of the complex of Senwosret III, providing the foundation for the Penn Museum's current excavations at South Abydos.

The Museum's association with Egypt began in 1890, when the redoubtable Sara Yorke Stevenson was appointed the first head of the Egyptian Section. During her tenure the Museum contributed to the fieldwork of the EEF and received important materials from their excavations between 1890 and 1907. As involved as Stevenson was with acquiring Egyptian material, however, she was unable to inaugurate the Museum's own excavations in Egypt.

This honor rather goes to David Randall-MacIver. Through his scientific training and association with Petrie, and his formidable energy and ambition, Randall-MacIver was appointed the Museum's first professional Egyptological Curator when Stevenson resigned in 1905. Funded by Eckley B. Coxe, Jr., the Museum's own fieldwork in Egypt began in 1906–1907 under Randall-MacIver's direction, quickly establishing the