

Preliminary Report

A Middle Kingdom Cemetery at Tarif

The following preliminary report was compiled following a visit to Luxor in the Easter of 1988 by ISIS Research Associate, Dr John Rose, and the Institute Director, David Rohl. It was felt that a general description of the work undertaken in the first Tarif excavation season would be useful prior to the publication of the detailed excavation report, if only to let ISIS members and other scholars know of the important work currently being undertaken by the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation at this little known site at the north end of the Theban necropolis. The following will also act as an introduction to the work of a respected colleague and ISIS Research Associate, Ismail el-Masry, Inspector of the West Bank for the EAO, whose excavation is the primary focus of this report.

Field Director
ISMAIL EL-MASRY

The village of Tarif lies at the northern end of the Theban necropolis, across the river from the temple complex of Karnak situated over on the East Bank. In the vicinity of the modern village are the royal 'saff' burials of the 11th Dynasty Theban rulers Sehtawy Inyotef I (Saff el-Baqar or Saff el-Dawaba), Wah'ankh Inyotef II (Saff el-Kisasiya), Nakhtnebtenufer Inyotef III (Saff el-Dawaba or Saff el-Baqar), as well as the tombs of some of the courtiers of the period. The term 'saff', attributed to these monuments, is from the arabic word for 'row' which aptly describes the principal characteristic of this type of tomb - a substantial rock-cut court bounded by long colonades and porticos.

A large part of the northern sector of the necropolis had been originally excavated by William Flinders Petrie in 1908. He divided the north-western section into two areas which he designated 'Cemetery A' and 'Cemetery B' [1]. As a result of the pottery discovered during these excavations, the burial ground of Cemetery A was dated by Petrie to the 11th and 12th Dynasties and that of Cemetery B separated into two phases, the first exploitation of the site dating approximately up to the end of the 11th Dynasty followed by then a secondary use during the Libyan and Saite eras. Further excavation work in this area was undertaken by the Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts under Field Director Dieter Arnold between 1970 and 1974 [2].

The circumstances of discovery

The new discoveries at Tarif have been made within the large open space (just to the east of Petrie's Cemetery B) which was for decades traditionally occupied by the local market and which is now surrounded on three sides by houses and on the fourth by a modern cemetery.

Because of the constant use of this clearing for local

trading and recreational activities, it had been overlooked, in recent times, as a potential archaeological site. Indeed little was expected to have been left preserved for the whole Tarif site on account of the work of the previous excavators. Petrie himself had stated that 'Most of the ground we touched will not need to be looked at again'.

Then, in 1985, one of the Antiquities Department guards at Tarif, Hassan Ali Taye, was undertaking his nightly inspection patrol of the area when he was alerted by the sound of activity coming from the darkness of the empty market place. On investigation he was confronted by a small group of illicit excavators who had been digging in search of portable antiquities. The guard's approach brought about a rapid retreat by the robbers into the darkness. Arriving at the spot, Taye was able to discern, by the light of his torch, a quantity of broken ancient pottery which had been discarded in their flight. He covered the remains with sand and kept a vigilant watch over the site until he was able to inform el-Masry at the Inspectorate office.

El-Masry immediately contacted the relevant officials at Luxor, Dr Mohammad el-Saghir, Dr Mohammed Nasr and Mr Magdy el-Mula, so that the discovery could be formally registered and permission granted for the cordoning-off of the site in preparation for subsequent excavation.

At the beginning of February 1987 the dig got underway with Ismail el-Masry as Field Director of the Tarif excavation site. Five workmen were allocated to undertake a series of exploratory sondages at location 3 (see map over).

An initial examination of the surface revealed no antiquities. The excavators were soon surprised, however, to find that on removing a thin layer of compacted sand which covered the rock base, the edges of tomb shafts were revealed.

The excavation

The site is bounded by the modern telephone exchange in the north and the Muslim cemetery to the south, with villagers' houses to the east and west. Within these confines the site occupies a total area of 15,850 square metres. This large area was divided by the excavator into two sectors, North and South, and excavation was initially commenced in the northern part on the 5th February. Almost immediately, a tomb shaft, measuring 2.40 x .75 metres was discovered which, on clearance, reached to a depth of 3 metres. At the bottom of the shaft rough-cut chambers led off on two sides. In due course some 26 similar burials were uncovered during the first season's work, all clustered around location number 3 on the sketch map (opposite).

The tombs have a basic common design: at the bottom of the shaft, which is cut as an elongated rectangle (roughly coffin shaped), a burial chamber lies at each end. It seems, therefore, that they were designed from the beginning as communal or family graves. In a number of cases further chambers had been cut into the sides of the shafts so that a multi-storeyed tomb was constructed with a common entrance. The general layout of the tombs fits well with the description given by Petrie for the adjacent Cemetery B:

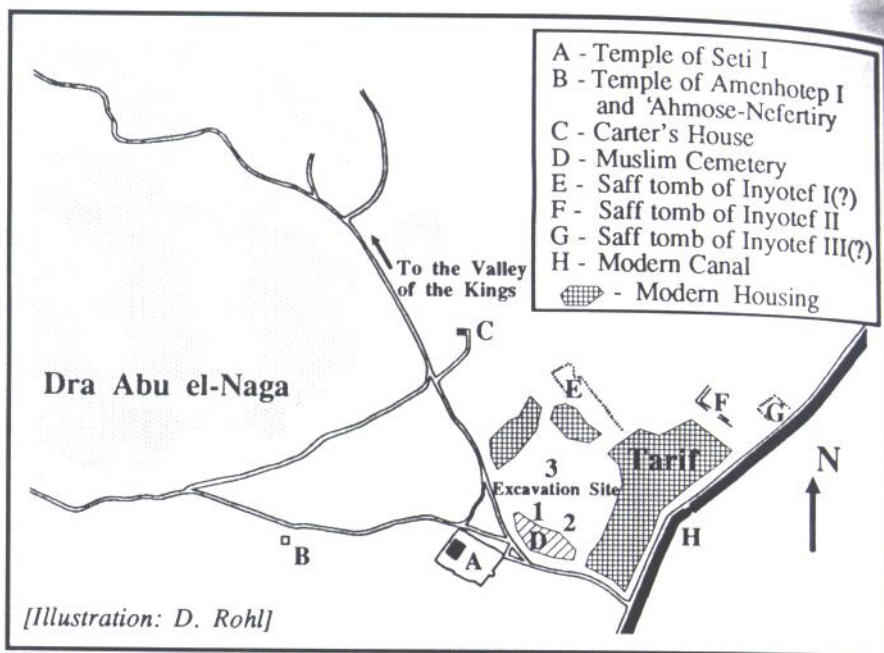
The form of the tombs with pottery was usually a long pit, with length averaging 90 inches in earlier and 87 in later times, breadth 33 in earlier, 27 in later, depth 108 in earlier and 132 in later times. The classes of earlier and later are separated by the absence or presence of wavy mouths and kohl

pottery. These pits had usually a chamber at each end, and the chambers show no difference between the periods, averaging 95 to 97 inches in length and width, and 36 inches in height. Altogether 48 tombs were measured. [3]

Either as a result of overcrowding or as a deliberate policy on the part of the builders, adjacent tombs had been interconnected so that it was possible for the excavators to descend via one shaft and return to the surface some metres distant from their original entry point. Because of the very rough appearance of the openings and the poor quality of bedrock in which the sepulchres had been hewn, it has been difficult to determine if the interconnections were intentional and a catacomb design was always intended for the various burial groupings within the complex. However only a small percentage were not connected in this way. Each tomb contained a number of skeletons.

The finds included a comprehensive range of funerary pottery of Middle Kingdom date, a model offering table, dishes, plates, cups, glassware etc, and part of an inscribed limestone block dedicated to Anubis (see photograph). Also amongst the debris were uninscribed funerary cones which appear to date from the 11th Dynasty on the basis of their similarity to those published by Gauthier [4].

After devoting eight weeks to the northern part of the site it was decided to move to the Southern sector in order to try to establish the southern boundary of the burial ground and to more satisfactorily control the total site excavations. The first 6 x 10 metre sondage was excavated at location 1, whereupon it was discovered that the bedrock, present only centimetres



[Illustration: D. Rohl]



Ismail el-Masry at location 3 of the Tarif cemetery, surrounded by the numerous shaft graves in this part of the excavation site. [Photo: D. Rohl]

below the surface in the northern sector, had here dropped to a considerable depth. The excavation revealed stratified sand layers to a depth of some 3 metres before bedrock was reached.

Subsequently, another sondage was made further south (at location 2) in order to clarify the position regarding the contours of the mother rock, but after several metres the bedrock had still not been reached. Although requiring further investigation, the tentative conclusion reached by the Field Director was that the southern sector was crossed by a sharp rock escarpment, perhaps representing the northern edge of the old water course which forms the continuation of the Wadi Biban el-Moluk.

A number of interesting finds were made during the course of excavations in this second test square including a dismembered torso; a stone marked grave and below the stones, at a depth of 2.5 metres from the modern surface, a fully intact skeleton, with a single pot; a mudbrick wall was also uncovered which appeared to form part of a burial chamber. The condition of this wall was such that it began to collapse upon excavation, so work on the clearance of the area was abandoned until next season. The discovery of an ancient mudbrick wall of this kind may point to the construction of mastaba-like tombs in the vicinity of the 11th Dynasty royal necropolis, although caution is certainly required until the structure is fully cleared in the coming year. It is planned that a full preliminary report on this second test square will be prepared for publication in *JACF* 3 following a further season's work at the site.

A return to excavations in the first southern sondage (sondage 1) resulted in the discovery of another mudbrick tomb containing what appears to have been a husband and wife burial. Finds from this grave included a fine necklace strung with scarabs, probably datable to the 18th Dynasty.

In this first southern sondage, 9 cms below the surface, a scattered quantity of mudbricks were found. They consisted of two types measuring 27x13x7 cms and 36x16x7 cms. Below these bricks a skull and pelvic bone were discovered. A visiting American scholar made a cursory analysis of the skull and tentatively suggested that it was not that of a native Egyptian but, in his view, appeared to bear a strong resemblance to specimens from ancient Iran - in other words that it may be dated to the Persian occupations of Egypt (525-404 & 343-332 BC). This has not as yet been confirmed by laboratory analysis, although plans are in hand to do this. In sondage 1 three more skulls were found, and again, in another spot within the same excavation, a separate interment of which only the legs and lower torso were found. All the above skeletal remains were at the 9-centimetre level.

After another 10 centimetres, a mudbrick structure was discovered, in the centre of which was a brick-lined shaft leading to a rock cut chamber. The working conditions in this tomb



Limestone block discovered during the first excavation season and probably dating from the 11th Dynasty. The text runs in four lines: 'A boon which is given by the king and by Anubis, he who is upon his mountain, and who is in the place of embalming [...] to the one who is revered before the Lord of the Sky - a beautiful burial in i[ss] [Tarif?]' [Photo: I. el-Masry]



Upper half of a femino 'Bes pot' found during the excavations and datable to the Third Intermediate Period. [Photo: I. el-Masry]

were unsafe due to water seepage, leaving the brickwork liable to collapse, so excavation was stopped in this area until the shaft could be stabilised. A cursory investigation of the chamber revealed the remains of two skulls.

I. el-Masry, J. Rose and D. Rohl

References

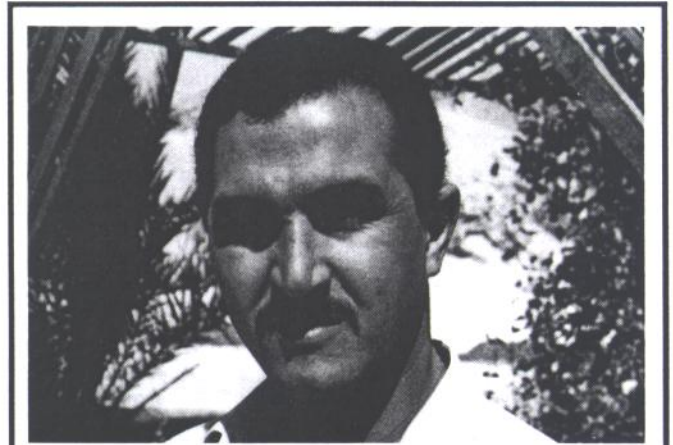
1. W. M. Flinders Petrie: *Qurneh* (London, 1909).
2. D. Arnold: *Gräber des Alten und Mittleren Reiches in El-Tarif* (Mainz am Rhein, 1976).
3. Petrie: op. cit. [1], p. 2.
4. H. Gauthier: 'Sur une campagne de fouilles à Draḥ Abou'l Neggah en 1906' in *BIFAO* 6 (1908), pp. 122ff.

Acknowledgement

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Ismail el-Masry
Field Director Tarif excavation

Below: Projected view of a typical shaft tomb from the Tarif cemetery (tomb 14) showing the elongated burial shaft and multiple chambers opening at the shaft base. [Original plan: I. el-Masry; Projection: B. Manley]



Ismail el-Masry graduated from the Faculty of Archaeology at Cairo University in 1978. He then worked with the E.A.O. archaeological team which discovered the valley temple of Ra'djedef, the short lived successor to king Khufu (4th Dynasty), at Abu Rawash.

In 1981 he was appointed the EAO 'accompanying inspector' to the foreign missions at Luxor. He has since worked with the Canadian mission in the search for the Akhenaten temple at East Karnak, the French mission both at Deir el-Medina and in the Valley of the Queens, and the German mission working in the tombs of the nobles and at the Qurna mortuary temple of Seti I.

In 1983 he moved to the Yemen where he taught ancient history. This was followed by two years in Iraq during which time he participated in the discovery of the archaeological remains of the pre-Islamic culture of the Nagaf region. He also established the Documentations Department at Samarra, the Islamic capital of Abassier province.

In 1986 he returned to Luxor and was appointed superintendent of excavations for the newly discovered section of the Tarif cemetery. During 1987 he also found two 17th Dynasty tombs at Dra Abu el-Naga.

[Photo: D. Rohl]

