

British Museum Expedition to  
**Amara West**

Preliminary report: 2009

A second season of fieldwork was undertaken at the settlement and associated cemetery of Amara West, near Abri in the Northern Province, between January 6<sup>th</sup> and February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009. The team consisted of Neal Spencer (director, archaeologist), Stephanie Aulsebrook (archaeologist), Michaela Binder (physical anthropologist), René Kertesz (ceramicist/archaeologist), Marie Millet (ceramicist), Mary Shepperson (archaeologist), Nicholas Soderbergh (archaeologist) and An Van Camp (archaeologist). Shadia Abdu Rabu acted as inspector for the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums (NCAM); her input and assistance are most gratefully acknowledged. The site ghaffir, Mounir Alleh-Saleh Abdallah, was also very helpful. We are of course grateful to Dr. Hassan Hussein Idris (Chairman, NCAM) and Dr. Saleh Mohammed Ahmed (Fieldwork Director), for permitting this work to take place, and also acknowledge the assistance of El-Hassan Mohammed Ahmed.



*View north over villa E12.10, with ovens and grain processing rooms to left, and main court to right*

Following the topographic and magnetometry survey of 2008, this season represented the first during which large-scale excavations were undertaken. Three areas were selected: one of the large buildings outside the western town wall (E12.10), a further large building inside the north-western part of the town (E13.3) and investigations in the eastern and northern cemetery.

**Villa E12.10**

The magnetometry survey revealed the existence of four or more large buildings lying outside the western wall of the Ramesside town. Their internal plan, and size, suggested that these were large elite houses, with features similar to those found at other

New Kingdom towns (Tell el-Amarna, Aniba, Sesebi). Excavations revealed the well-preserved mud-brick architecture of the villa's lower floor, covering an area of 17x25.6m. The latest floor levels were preserved in most rooms, beneath thick deposits of windblown sand, mixed material from episodes of wall- and ceiling-collapse. An entrance porch provided access to a sandstone doorway, with jambs still *in situ*, itself leading to a large courtyard that represented the focal point of the front area of the house. Well preserved brick storage bins, set on stone plinths, were found built against one wall, in addition to fragments of two dismantled sandstone gateways, presumably from an earlier phase of the villa. A doorway in the south-western corner of the courtyard provided access to a service area, consisting of a room with grain-processing installations, next to a kitchen area, which preserved the remains of nine ovens, some of which were in use simultaneously.

The rear part of the building consisted of a long cross-hall, providing access to a staircase to the upper storey. Beyond lay an internal courtyard, with a whitewashed and plastered brick pavement still preserved, off which lay two further rooms, one of which could be identified as a bedroom, on the basis of a platform at its southern end.

The ceramics from the villa dated almost entirely to the later stages of the New Kingdom, or 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty. Around 90% of the assemblage consisted of Egyptian pottery made from Nile silt, and was notable for the lack of fineware. The remaining pottery (10%) consisted of Nubian cooking vessels of various sizes. Surprisingly few finds were recovered from the latest phase of the villa.

Several architectural phases were evident within the fabric of the building, noticeably the addition of a room at the southern end of the main court, but also the blocking of several doorways. In addition, two sondages elucidated the earlier history of the building. Beneath one of the private rooms in the north-eastern corner of the villa, a layer of occupation debris was encountered, which yielded fragments of fine faience and calcite vessels, but also a large number of seal-impressions. These remain to be studied in full, but included examples with the prenomen of Tuthmosis III. The pottery in this early rubbish deposit included forms of the 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty, including blue-painted ware. The sondage in the courtyard revealed an earlier floor level, but also the remains of an earlier southern exterior wall to the building. An ostracon bearing a hieratic copy of the Middle Egyptian literary classic, the *Teaching of Amenemhat*, was recovered from the earliest layer of debris beneath the villa.



*Ostracon with copy of the Teaching of Amenemhat, from beneath court of villa*



*Entrance porch to villa, with sandstone doorjambs, and later brick blocking, still in situ*

Finally, the outline of a large semicircular brick structure, bonded to a north-south wall, was exposed, lying over the south-eastern corner of the villa. It is hoped that further

investigation of this area might yield information on the post-New Kingdom occupation of the site.

### **Building E13.3**

This building, or series of contiguous buildings, was identified through the magnetometry survey. Lying immediately north of the Governor's Residence, excavated by the Egypt Exploration Society in the late 1940s, it was not aligned to the other houses and buildings within the town. Initially, this 45 degree change in alignment was thought to reflect a chronological change, but excavation has shown that the six architectural phases identified this season can all be dated to the later part of the New Kingdom.



*View west over storage magazines (to right and middle), with later architectural modifications*

The earliest phase encountered in this season's excavations consisted of at least two contiguous rooms with vaulted ceilings (7.1x2.6m), whose size, form and architecture suggest use as storage magazines. The preponderance of storage amphorae, the discovery of seal impressions and a hieratic ostracum bearing a record of commodity deliveries, is consistent with this interpretation. Within, over and around these structures, the construction of additional walls, and modifications to existing walls, through several different phases, saw the character of the area change, with smaller spaces, rooms with ovens and hearths, and also a grain-processing area. In total, 15 rooms were identified within the 20x10m area exposed. The walls were covered in mud-plaster, and sandstone doorjambs were used for certain doors. The remains of two staircases indicated the presence of upper storeys in some parts of the building(s).

The ceramics were once again of 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty date, with around 10% Nubian cooking vessels. In the lowest occupation layers, 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty pottery predominates. Small finds from the area included a considerable number of ceramic discs or counters, but also small schist weights, and grindstones. The upper part of a sandstone stela, bearing a depiction

of Amun-Ra as a ram with the double-feathered headdress, had been re-used as the lid for a storage jar buried in the floor of one room.



*Stela with depiction of Amun-Ra*



*Fragments of Egyptian amphorae from magazine area*

### **The Eastern Cemetery**

In 1938-39, the Egypt Exploration Society undertook brief excavations at a cemetery in Amara West, but the location of the tombs was not recorded. As part of this project's attempt to elucidate the nature of human occupation at the site, and particularly the interaction between Nubian and Egyptian inhabitants, re-identifying the cemetery area was seen as a priority, particularly for scientific analyses on skeletal remains.

To the north-east of the town site, on the eastern edge of a wadi, the badly disturbed remains of a cemetery (C) were identified in 2008 (robbed out tumuli, bone scatter on surface). A magnetometry survey of part of the cemetery revealed the position of grave cuts, and those with little evidence for recent disturbance were chosen for a preliminary excavation this year.



*Sandstone door-lintel, re-used as a blocking stone in grave 210*

Parts of eleven tombs were excavated, with few surviving superstructures. The form and arrangements of these tombs varied significantly, and all had been disturbed in antiquity. However, the skeletal material was well preserved, and the burial assemblages were also relatively intact. The largest tomb was a tumulus (Grave 210); the robbed out shaft

yielded the remains of three individuals, but also a large Ramesside sandstone door lintel used as a blocking. Our excavations then focused on the area surrounding the tumulus, where a series of shallow graves, some with burials of very small infants, were excavated.



*Grave 211, with blocking over lateral niche*



*Faience situla (Grave 211)*



*Faience plaque (Grave 201)*

In addition, two larger tombs were explored. Firstly, grave 211 featured a shaft with one lateral burial niche and a large chamber cut into the alluvium. The niche was essentially intact, blocked with a large schist slab, beneath which lay a skeleton wrapped in finely woven material and matting. Secondly, grave 201 consisted of an access shaft, with large chambers hewn out of the alluvium, originally blocked with stone slabs. These chambers had been badly disturbed, and up to 20 individuals had been buried in the tomb. At least 33 ceramic vessels (bowls, shallow plates, beer jars and large storage jars) were recovered, along with many fragments of both wooden coffins and funerary beds.



*Painted plaster decoration (Grave 201)*



*Ceramic assemblage from Grave 201*

In addition to beads, amulets, scarabs and at least one head-rest, a notable feature was the large amounts of white plaster, some decorated with decoration in red and black ink. This included the head of a falcon, clearly an Egyptianising motif. It is not yet clear if the plaster fragments derive from the wall or coffins.

The pottery from this cemetery all dated to the period between the end of the New Kingdom and the start of the 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty, and further excavations here should elucidate aspects of this poorly understood era.

### **The Western Cemetery**

A brief exploration was undertaken in the western cemetery (D), where a cluster of tumuli are visible upon the surface. A two-chambered tomb cut into the schist bedrock was partly excavated, yielding remains of several skeletons but little else other than fragments of unpainted plaster. Immediately to the south, surface clearance revealed two tomb superstructures (graves 112 and 301), consisting of rectangular chapels (4.4x3.3m),

one of which was provided with a small square foundation (1.5m sides) at its western end. The size, plan and location of these suggest that they are small pyramid tombs with associated chapels, much like those at nearby Sai. With associated pottery of New Kingdom date encountered in the area, it is likely this western cemetery was the burial place of the Egyptian elite, resident at Amara West in the late second millennium BC.



*Grave 112, with mudbrick chapel and small pyramid to the east, in the western cemetery*

### **Paleochannel research**

Since the Egypt Exploration Society excavations, it has been suspected that Amara West was once an island, with a dried up river bed framing the north of the town site. While it can be assumed that this flowed in New Kingdom times, as the town and temple are orientated towards this channel not the main Nile channel, the project has instigated a project to seek evidence for when the channel ceased to regularly flow, as this may have dictated the gradual abandonment of the area in the early first millennium BC.

Two sondages were dug through the paleochannel, one of which (Pit 1) exposed five flood episodes, represented by layers of water-borne silt deposits, with intervening deposits of windblown sand. Five samples, of sand from beneath each silt layers, were taken for OSL dating.

### **Scientific Analyses**

With the permission of NCAM, the project will export archaeological samples for botanical analysis at the British Museum, but also sherds from cooking vessels and serving plates, excavated within the town areas. These sherds will allow detailed work on ceramic petrography to take place, but also the undertaking of pilot studies on food residue analysis, to identify variation in food consumption across different areas of the site, and through its occupation history. Finally, a selection of skeletal material from the cemetery has been chosen to allow further research on the inhabitants' health, pathologies and gender, and dental samples will be submitted for strontium isotope analysis, to seek information on the place of origin of those buried in the town's cemeteries.

It is hoped that NCAM will continue to permit work at Amara West, which offers a rare opportunity to investigate a well-preserved late New Kingdom town and cemetery, and to investigate, through scientific analyses, the nature of the lived experience of both Nubians and pharaonic Egyptians, at the site.

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