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Elkab, the ancient town of Nekheb, is situated in southern Upper Egypt, on the right bank of the Nile, about 15km north of Edfu, and opposite Kom el-Ahmar (ancient Hierakonpolis). The present-day name Elkab is probably derived from the ancient toponym Nekheb, which is in turn related to the name of the goddess Nekhbet. Most often represented as a vulture, Nekhbet was not only the local goddess of Elkab, but was also considered the tutelary deity for the whole of Upper Egypt. When travelling by train, boat or car between Luxor and Aswan, it is almost impossible to overlook Elkab. The site is noticeable in the landscape because of its massive mudbrick enclosure wall (fig. 1), which was probably constructed around the middle of the 4th century BC, during the Thirtieth Dynasty. This rectangular enclosure wall, measuring approximately 520 by 590 m, is not the only relic of the past that can currently be found at the extensive site of Elkab, which covers an area of 16km² (fig. 3). Archaeological remains dating to all periods of ancient Egypt, from Prehistory to Graeco-Roman times, are present at Elkab.

Elkab was already visited by European travellers around 1740, but the first comprehensive investigations were those of British archaeologists during the late 19th and early 20th centuries: James Edward Quibell, Frederick William Green, Archibald Henry Sayce, Joseph John Tylor and Somers Clarke. The architect and archaeologist Somers Clarke not only undertook valuable work at Elkab, but he also built a marvellous expedition house in 1906 (fig. 2), about 3km upstream, close to the village of el-Nasrab. Somers Clarke wintered here until his death in 1926. Some years later the Egyptian authorities put ‘Beit Clarke’ at the disposal of the Belgian archaeologists, who commenced work at Elkab in 1937. The celebrated Egyptologist Jean Capart, and his successor Pierre Gilbert, directed excavations at the site during the years before and after the Second World War.

1 For the geography, geology and topography of the site, see Vermeersch, Elkab II, 1–11 and Depuydt, Elkab IV/1.
3 De Meulenaere, CadE 61, 208–9; Hendrickx, Huyge and Newton in Cities and Urbanism in Ancient Egypt (forthcoming).
4 For an overview of the archaeological remains and their topographical location, see Hendrickx and Huyge, Elkab IV/2 (with bibliography).
5 For a survey of the discovery history of Elkab, see Derchain, Elkab I, 1–3.
6 Bibliographical references concerning their research at Elkab can be found in Hendrickx and Huyge, Elkab IV/2, 22–5; for A.H. Sayce, see also Cockle, CadE 66, 31–8.
7 Capart, Elkab Impressions et Souvenirs, 23–30.
8 [Capart et al.], Fouilles de El Kab.
Excavations within the ancient town enclosure

The interest of Capart and Gilbert in the site of Elkab was essentially confined to the area within the mudbrick enclosure wall (fig. 4). Inside lie two contiguous temples. The larger, eastern, temple is dedicated to the vulture-goddess Nekhbet. The remains visible today date to the late Pharaonic era, but it is beyond doubt that the temple was constructed, at least in part, making use of blocks belonging to older buildings. The western temple principally dates to the reign of Ramses II, and was built in honour of the god Thoth, who was associated with Nekhbet at Elkab. These temples are presently in a rather ruined condition, with only foundations preserved (fig. 5). We know that they were partly demolished in the first half of the 19th century, probably in November 1828, and that the sandstone blocks were reused in various modern constructions in the area. At the time of Bonaparte’s expedition in Egypt (1798-1799), parts of the temples, with columns and architraves, were still standing (fig. 6). Even though little remained of the temples, the work of Capart and Gilbert led to important discoveries regarding their building history, and interesting objects were also recovered. Some of these are now kept in the Egyptian section of the Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire in Brussels, for example a bust of Amenhotep II and a royal sphinx attributed to the Thirtieth Dynasty, probably from the reign of Nectanebo I. At that time, the excavations at Elkab took place under the auspices of the Fondation Egyptologique Reine Elisabeth and the Musées Royaux, of which the financial means were very limited. The situation became much brighter in 1965 thanks to the creation of a Committee for Belgian Excavations in Egypt, then financed by the National Ministry of Education. During more than 30 years, with some periods of interruption, this committee organized excavations at Elkab. The work during this period was directed by Herman De Meulenaere, until I had the pleasure to assume responsibility in 1988.

At the beginning, the principal objective was to continue the work done by the Fondation Egyptologique in the area of the temple of Nekhbet and its immediate environs. These investigations have not been without result. They have exposed part of the dromos,
i.e. the paved road providing access to the great temple. Attention was also paid to the foundations of the temple in which decorated blocks belonging to earlier buildings were found. The most ancient blocks date to the Middle Kingdom and originally belonged to a barque shrine built by Sobekhotep III, a king of the Thirteenth Dynasty (fig. 7).

These activities within the sacred temple enclosure of Elkab date back to the years 1966 to 1969. At the same time, work took place at various locations within the great enclosure. For example, Pierre Vermeersch investigated the prehistoric sector of the site, which led to the discovery of a previously unknown epipalaeolithic industry that is now known in the archaeological literature as the 'Elkabian'. It can be dated to around 7000 BC.

The excavations undertaken at Elkab over the years have confirmed that all major periods of Egyptian history are represented. Since 1968, but especially in the late 1970s, large parts of a predynastic Naqada III cemetery were brought to light by Pierre Vermeersch and Stan Hendrickx. The tombs are very simple, shallow, pit-graves, but they contain a large variety of often well-preserved objects. Among the finds, vessels are of course well-represented. The majority of these are made from pottery, but there are also a substantial number of receptacles in hardstone such as calcite and diorite (fig. 8). Some tombs contained greywacke cosmetic palettes. Necklaces and bracelets were also found, some with components from semiprecious stone, particularly of carnelian.

At a small distance from the predynastic necropolis, archaeological remains of a completely different nature were discovered: a village of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods with perfectly rectangular houses and a rectilinear street layout (fig. 9). In fact, the Graeco-Roman village of Elkab seems to have been demolished and abruptly abandoned around 380 AD. Was this the result of a political or military event? In any case, the house walls, constructed in mudbrick, had been razed to the ground, either in ancient times or by the sebakbin of the 19th century. Only the lower part of the walls remains. But those responsible for their destruction did not pay particular attention to the contents of the houses. These still contained interesting objects. Numerous bronze coins were recovered, dating to the 1st-4th centuries of our era, and, of course, huge amounts of pottery. Of major importance was the discovery of hundreds of demotic and Greek ostraca, bearing administrative texts. The Greek ostraca, for instance, are for the most part bills or tax receipts. They are all the more interesting as they often bear a date, which has proven to be very helpful for dating the archaeological context in which they have been found. The demotic texts on the other hand, are much more difficult to date and also more varied as far as their content is concerned: all manner of inventories, lists of names and festivals, and letters. Thanks to these texts it has been possible to gain an insight into the economic and social life of the inhabitants of Elkab during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. According to the study of Stan Hendrickx,

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18 De Meulenaere et al., CDE 45, 27–8.
19 For these blocks and a theoretical reconstruction of the barque shrine, see Eder, Elkab VII.
20 De Meulenaere et al., CDE 45, 19–44.
21 Vermeersch, Elkab II.
22 Hendrickx, Elkab V.
23 Some of the houses were occupied by potters. See Hendrickx in Clarysse, Schoors and Willems, Egyptian Religion, 1353–76.
it is highly probable that the houses where the ostraca were found were inhabited by potters, producing amphorae for the transport of natron, for which Elkab was an important centre. The Greek ostraca have been published by Jean Bingen and Willy Clarysse. The demotic texts were copied and studied by Jan Quaegebeur, but unfortunately this brilliant Egyptologist passed away in 1995, which leaves the final publication of his work to be completed.

The rock necropolis and the rock inscriptions in the Wadi Hilâl

The research described above all took place within the town enclosure of Elkab. From the 1980s onwards, however, our interest in the site shifted to the desert area north and northeast of the town. This area, in fact, corresponds more or less to the mouth of the Wadi Hilâl, in which several large free-standing rocks are situated (fig. 10). At the entrance to the wadi, close to the road that links Luxor to Aswan, towers an enormous sandstone hill, about 50m high. This rocky hill is honeycombed with rock-cut tombs (fig. 11). During about fifteen years this immense rock necropolis has been the main focus of the Belgian archaeological mission. To explain the motivation for work in this sector, attention has to be paid to another archaeological particularity of the Wadi Hilâl.

The faces of several free-standing rocks and hills bear large numbers of petroglyphs, ranging from Predynastic to Islamic times, and hieroglyphic inscriptions of the pharaonic period. About six hundred inscriptions, mostly written in semi-cursive hieroglyphs, have been recovered. For the greater part they date back to the Old Kingdom, more precisely to the Sixth Dynasty (fig. 12). Although Jozef Janssen and Arpag Mekhitarian produced hand copies and photographs of most of the inscriptions in January-March 1950, four other seasons (1981-1987) were required in order to complete the recording. This work has been done in an exemplary fashion by Hans Vandekerckhove, who has made facsimiles (fig. 13) of the inscriptions and also produced a PhD dissertation on the subject. Unfortunately, the final publication of the texts has been much delayed because of the unexpected death of the author, at the age of twenty-nine. The cooperation of Dr. Renate Müller-Wollermann from Tübingen, however, enabled the production of a final publication in 2001.

Contrary to expectations, these rock inscriptions are not merely the graffiti of travellers passing through Elkab. In most cases, they have been engraved for residents of the settlement, particularly the priests attached to the cults of the vulture-goddess Nekhbet and other local

27 A detailed topographical inset map (1:1000) of part of the Wadi Hilâl has been published together with Depuydt, *Elkab IV/1* and Hendrickx and Huyge, *Elkab IV/2*.
28 These rock drawings have been fully recorded by Dirk Huyge between 1979 and 1983. For a recent preliminary report, see Huyge in Friedman, *Gifts of the Desert*, 196–206.
29 Janssen and Mekhitarian, *ASAE* 51, 313–16.
30 Vandekerckhove and Müller-Wollermann, *Elkab VI*. 
divinities. With a few exceptions, the rock inscriptions are short texts mentioning proper names and titles specifying the function of the people involved. In gathering the evidence provided by this abundant philological material, it has been possible to construct complex genealogies and obtain a wealth of prosopographical data. At the outset of the study of these inscriptions, we had no notion as to where these people were buried. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, British archaeologists had unearthed a few Old Kingdom tombs in the vicinity of the town enclosure, but these dated back to the Fourth Dynasty, not to the Sixth, and thus did not present any link with the inscriptions in the desert.

The enigma was eventually solved through discoveries in the main rock necropolis. More than 300 ancient tombs have been identified, but only a dozen have decorated chapels. Four New Kingdom tombs are accessible to the public at this moment: the tombs of Pahery, Setau, Ahmose son of Ibana, and Reneny (fig. 14). The tomb of Setau dates back to the Twentieth Dynasty; the other tombs are of the the Eighteenth Dynasty. Among the other decorated tombs, none were thought to pre-date the Middle Kingdom. A prospection in the rock necropolis during 1986 proved that this was not the case, as a funerary chapel of the Old Kingdom was discovered (tomb BE 1). This chapel is a small rock-cut chamber with painted decoration on the back wall (figs. 15–16). Unfortunately, the decorated wall was heavily damaged by the insertion of two oblong niches, possibly in the Greco-Roman period. These niches were probably intended for the burial of crocodile mummies. Similar niches have in fact been found throughout the necropolis, and presumably attest to the cult of Sobek, the crocodile-god venerated at Elkab. The inscriptions in this tomb indicate that the owner of the tomb bore the name Sawikai and that he held, inter alia, the functions of ‘overseer of priests’ and dišty (‘counsellor?’). The same name occurs several times amongst the Sixth Dynasty rock inscriptions in the Wadi Hilâl (figs. 12–13).

Following the discovery of this tomb, a systematic exploration of the area was instigated in 1987, revealing the presence of four other tombs of the same type.

All of these tombs featured similar architectural layout, with (1) a rock-cut funerary chapel, (2) a burial pit in front of the chapel, often combined with a sloping ramp or a staircase which

31 Limme, BSFE 149, 17. The dating of these tombs has been confirmed by the pottery found by the Belgian Mission, in February-March 2000, during additional investigations in the same area; see Op de Beeck, CCE 7, 248–50.
32 PM V, 177–84.
33 If the date (‘Dyn. XII’) to which the tomb of Senusert is attributed by Porter and Moss (PM V: 184) is correct. As the name Senusert also occurs after the Twelfth Dynasty (Ranke, PN, 279[1]), a more recent date (Second Intermediate Period?) is possible.
34 De Meulenaere, CdE: 44, 103–21. See also Gautier and Hendrickx in Becker et al., Historia animalium ex osibus, 1712; Gautier, Arbatojanna 14, 164–5.
35 Śt-w(i)-k(i=)i. This name seems to be typical for Elkab. For its transliteration and its interpretation, see Vandekerckhove and Müller-Wollermann, Elkab VI, 287–8 [135].
36 The title dišty, the meaning of which is still problematic, is specific to Elkab, where it occurs many times. ‘Counsellor’ seems a plausible translation, Vandekerckhove and Müller-Wollermann, Elkab VI, 333–5.
provided access to (3) a burial chamber located precisely below the rock-cut chapel.\(^{38}\)

The 1987 campaign was rather disappointing in terms of archaeological finds. Enormous quantities of pottery were discovered, but the Old Kingdom material was not found in situ, and the rest of the pottery dated essentially to the Greco-Roman period.\(^{39}\) It was in any case clear that our tombs had been reused, and probably more than once. One element that prompted us to continue the excavations in this sector was the find of a fragmentary pottery platter – a so-called ‘Meidum bowl’\(^{40}\) – with an inscription containing the name of a certain Idi (fig. 17), possibly a son of Sawikai.\(^{41}\) In November 1988, the façade of a small Old Kingdom chapel was revealed (tomb BE 7; fig. 18). It was immediately clear that this chapel was not intact, as a large stone originally used to block up the entrance was no longer in position. Furthermore, the interior of the chapel was filled with debris, including many fragments of a painted wooden coffin, indicating that the chapel had been reused as a burial chamber. Nevertheless, we started to clear the area in front of the entrance of the chapel, in order to locate the original burial shaft. Pottery vases began to appear, one after the other. Though rather crude, they were clearly datable to the Old Kingdom. The vases had been deposited haphazardly and constituted a 50cm thick layer, distributed over several square metres (fig. 19),\(^{42}\) amounting to over a thousand vases. It was clear that this must have been some kind of ritual deposit. As the layer of vases entirely covered the location of the burial pit, we were hopeful that the Old Kingdom burial chamber would be intact, which proved to be the case. The entrance to the chamber had originally been blocked with rough stones, but the upper part of the blocking had collapsed. At the other end of the pit, precisely below the funerary chapel, a second entrance was uncovered, which was still completely blocked up with stones (fig. 20).

We first started to dismantle the blocking of the smaller chamber (‘chamber B’). A pile of disintegrated wood fragments (originally from a coffin), a human skull, a globular pottery vase and a greenish metal object were immediately visible (fig. 21). The metal object proved to be an oval bronze mirror (fig. 22), inscribed for a lady named Irtenakhty,\(^{43}\) who bore the titles ‘priestess of the goddess Hathor’ and ‘acquaintance of the king’. After Irtenakhty’s skeleton had been completely exposed, it was clear she had been buried on her side, with both knees pulled up (fig. 23). The body did not show any traces of mummification, but she had been adorned with bone bracelets around her arms. The wooden coffin had completely disintegrated, as had two small boxes that had been deposited against the back wall of the burial chamber. Negative traces of them were recovered from the sand fill of the tomb, but their contents were well preserved: bracelets and small calcite vases. Two bronze handles, with

\(^{38}\) See, for example, our fig. 20 (cross-section of tomb BE 7).

\(^{39}\) Hendrickx in *Atti VI Congresso*, 255–7, with pl.8.

\(^{40}\) For this form of vessel, see Op de Beeck, *CCÉ* 7, 239–80.

\(^{41}\) Vandekerckhove and Müller-Wollermann, *Elkab VI*, 16–17 and passim.

\(^{42}\) For the pottery found in this place and in other parts of the rock necropolis of Elkab, see Hendrickx and Huyge, *Bulletin de Liaison du Groupe international d’Étude de la Céramique égyptienne* 18, 50–6 (where ‘tombe 17’ should be read ‘tombe BE 7’, since the tombs have been renumbered) and Hendrickx and Huyge, *Bulletin de Liaison du Groupe international d’Étude de la Céramique égyptienne* 20, 36–44.

\(^{43}\) The name *Irt-n-hḥt(ny)* is not known to me from other sources. For its masculine equivalent *Ir(w)-n-hḥty*, see Limme, *BAFE* 149, 26, n. 32 and Vandekerckhove and Müller-Wollermann, *Elkab VI*, 282.
which one of the boxes was fitted, also survived.

With the discovery of an intact burial, the mission was eager to investigate the second chamber (‘chamber A’) that was still completely closed up. At first sight, the situation was very similar to that in the other chamber: the disintegrated remains of a wooden coffin, and burial goods scattered around the room. Evidently, this tomb was also intact (fig. 24). The skeleton was placed in an identical position to the lady in the adjacent chamber. The remainder of the funerary assemblage was quite different from that of the other burial. In particular, the pottery was nearly all of a completely different type and must therefore have served a different purpose. Close to the feet of the skeleton, two dishes still contained the remains of nourishment: different types of cereal, a few chunks of bread or cake, and some currants. There was also a large cylindrical calcite vase, broken in pieces. It seems highly probable that at the time of the burial this vase was placed on top of the coffin lid and that it fell down and broke into pieces when the coffin collapsed. To the right of the skeleton, we found a copper hand basin containing a ewer with a long spout, also in copper, worthy of display in any museum (fig. 25). No inscriptions were found in this chamber, but it is reasonable to assume that this was the burial of Irtenakhty’s husband. According to the anthropological analysis, the skeleton was that of a male person, aged about forty at the time of death.

The discovery of an unviolated Old Kingdom tomb has encouraged further research in this area. Shortly after the 1988 season, however, the federalisation of Belgium led to the withdrawal of financial support for the Committee for Belgian Excavations in Egypt, as was the case for most Belgian archaeological centres operating abroad. Substantial grants from the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research and the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels allowed the instigation of full-scale excavation seasons from February-March 1996.

The main purpose of the 1996 season was to continue the excavation in a sector that had already been partly cleared the year before. During the clearance of a funerary pit, about 2.50m deep (tomb BE 18), the entrance to a burial chamber obstructed by a large slab of stone was uncovered (fig. 26). This slab was still sealed with Nile mud. Once this blocking was removed, the interior of the tomb presented a rather confused appearance, despite being undisturbed since the burial. All of the funerary material was still present and in place. There were no less than four wooden coffins, partially devoured by vermin, but still containing the original mummies. In addition, two mummies were found without a coffin. One of the coffins even contained two mummies, separated from each other by a plank. The painted decoration of the coffins had largely disappeared and only a few traces of inscriptions were found. Some hieroglyphic signs were noted here and there but their context had been entirely lost. In any case, not enough of the inscriptions remained to allow for a reconstruction of the names and titles of the owners, which typically appear on coffins.

One of the mummies was provided with a bronze mirror (fig. 27), with a handle in the form of a blooming papyrus umbel, flanked by back to back falcons. This type of mirror with falcons occurs in Egypt and Nubia during the Middle Kingdom through until the New Kingdom. The stylistic features of our mirror, including the zigzag pattern on the stem of the papyrus umbel, are very closely paralleled by a specimen found in a tomb of the Eighteenth Dynasty at Semna (Sudan) and now kept in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.\(^4\)

\(^4\) 27.872. See *Egypt’s Golden Age*, 185–6 [214] (‘Early Dynasty 18’); *Soudan. Royaumes sur le Nil*, 83 [89] ('Moyen/ Nouvel Empire'). Another very similar, but unprovenanced, mirror is kept in the Musées Royaux d’Art et
axe blade with openwork decoration that was found in the same tomb is also typical of the Eighteenth Dynasty (fig. 28). The object is badly corroded, but the openwork scene is clear, depicting a lion attacking a bull. Evidently this was not an axe intended for use in battle, but rather an object with an amuletic and apotropaic function.\footnote{For this type of bronze axe with openwork decoration, see Davies, \textit{Tools and weapons} I, 52–4, pl. 28; Raven and Schneider, \textit{OMRO} 76, 153 and 159, fig. 1.}

Together with these two beautiful bronze artefacts, the assemblage in tomb BE 18 encompassed a large quantity of New Kingdom pottery, as well as funerary gifts, such as \textit{dom}-palm fruits, knucklebones, gaming pieces, and a remarkable miniature ointment vase (figs. 29–30). This last piece was manufactured using a series of discs, of alternating types of wood, resulting in a lively light and dark colour scheme.

The mastaba on top of the rock necropolis

An enigmatic structure atop the rock necropolis was also the focus of work during the 1996 season. About ten years earlier, Dirk Huyge had undertaken a small survey of that part of the necropolis, and noted the remains of a building which he thought might have been an Old Kingdom mastaba. The position of this mastaba, at the summit of a 50m-high hill, is entirely unparalleled in the history of Egyptian funerary architecture.\footnote{For preliminary reports on this project, see Limme, Hendrickx and Huyge, \textit{EA} 11, 5–6; Limme, \textit{BSFE} 149, 26–31; Huyge, \textit{EA} 22, 29–30.}

This structure was built of mud brick (fig. 32) and covered an area of 20x10m; its original height could not be determined. The plan could be recovered (fig. 31), with the funerary pit and an L-shaped rock-cut staircase, which meet at a depth of about 10m. A series of shallow niches embellished the exterior of the mastaba. One of these recesses, found almost fully preserved, was much larger and deeper than the others, thus presumably intended for the deposition of funerary offerings. Vases and two pot-stands were found within the niche (fig. 33), undisturbed for over four thousand years. The architecture of this mastaba is similar to that of certain large Third Dynasty mastabas in the Memphite area, such as that of Hesyra at Saqqara.\footnote{Huyge, \textit{EA} 22, 30.} The types of stone vessels and pottery, particularly the sherds from ‘Meidum bowls’, found in connection with the superstructure of the Elkab mastaba, also support a Third Dynasty date for its construction.\footnote{For the ‘Meidum bowls’, see Op de Beeck, \textit{CCÉ} 7, 249, fig. 3 [12–25].}

Thereafter, tons of debris filling the stairwell and funerary pit were removed; opposite the lowest step of the staircase appeared a small rock-cut chamber. The interior of the small chamber was stuffed with five coffins belonging to adults, and two child mummies without a coffin. Unfortunately, both coffins and mummies were in a poor state of preservation.

The painted decoration of the best preserved coffin (fig. 35) was partly covered with dirt, which turned out to be almost impossible to remove. Nevertheless, some parts of the painting were still intact and displayed the stylistic characteristics of painted coffins with

yellow ground, produced at Thebes during the Twenty-first Dynasty. Thus Elkab can now be added to the very small number of sites outside Thebes where private coffins of this type have been discovered. Associated ceramics indicate that the mastaba was still in use in Graeco-Roman times; the fill of the funerary pit had clearly been turned over several times during ancient times.

It became evident that the funerary pit continued beyond the floor level of the small chamber with the coffins, which was not the original burial chamber of the mastaba, but rather a storage room intended for stone vessels. An enormous number of fragments, of various stone types, found in the vicinity of the superstructure and in the filling of the stairwell and the funerary shaft, provide evidence for this interpretation. The original burial chamber must have been situated at a greater depth, at the very bottom of the funerary shaft. Safety considerations and the lack of the necessary technical equipment precluded further investigation that season, with excavation ceasing at a depth of around 21m below the surface.

The acquisition of an electrical winch allowed work on the shaft to resume in 1999, with the hope of discovering an intact funerary chamber. At a depth of around 22m, however, two child skeletons were discovered in the shaft fill (fig. 34). These did not show any trace of mummification, and one was almost completely covered by a fragmentary coffin lid, probably of the New Kingdom or Third Intermediate Period. Two small blue faience vases were found nearby, datable to the same period (fig. 36). We do not completely understand the significance of this find, though it provided further evidence that the Old Kingdom mastaba had been reused several times. Its shaft and burial chamber even served as depositories for animal mummies and remains. Several days later, we started to clear the true burial chamber, but it had been thoroughly plundered in antiquity. The room was of a modest size (3x1.7m), with rather roughly cut walls. Two skeletons were found within, completely disarticulated, and a few pieces of an Old Kingdom burial assemblage survived, including flint artefacts and two small calcite vases.

Though the excavation of the funerary pit and the burial chamber of the mastaba was a laborious, and at first sight disappointing, enterprise, the investigation was certainly worth the effort, particularly as it allowed our architect to fully document the architecture of this exceptional monument. The excavation also recovered a wealth of archaeological data relating to the different phases of use of the mastaba.

The Second Dynasty cemetery

In 1999, following completion of the excavation of the mastaba, the focus of archaeological

49 For this kind of coffin, decorated with 'mythological' scenes painted on a yellow ground, see Niwinski, 21st Dynasty Coffins; Taylor, Egyptian Coffins, 41–6; van Walsem, BiOr 50, 9–91; Gasse, Sarcophages; van Walsem, Djedmonthuiufankh.

50 Amarna, Akhmim and Kom Ombo, according to Taylor, Egyptian Coffins, 46.

51 As shown, for example, by two short demotic ink inscriptions on pottery vessels, palaeographically datable to the 4th or 3rd century BC (according to Mark Depauw; personal communication).

52 Gautier, Archaeofauna 14, 166.

53 Gautier, Archaeofauna 14, 166.
investigations at Elkab has shifted to the lower slope of the rock necropolis, where a number of small tombs dating back to the Early Dynastic period have been discovered. This isolated cemetery was laid out around a large natural boulder (fig. 37). The tombs were lined with large undressed stone slabs, readily available in the immediate vicinity (fig. 38). In 1999 and 2000, more than thirty tombs of this type were excavated, all of them practically intact. The majority contained infant skeletons, with only five adult burials discovered. The corpses were buried in contracted position, with the hands mostly placed close to the face. Nearly all of the tombs contained one to three pieces of pottery and occasionally also a hard stone vessel. Some of the deceased bore necklaces composed of faience beads, others wore bone bracelets. Many of the corpses were covered one way or another, with one infant deposited in a small wooden box. Remarkably, the body had been deliberately dismembered prior to burial (fig. 40).

As already mentioned, the cemetery, which is possibly a family burial ground, dates back to the Early Dynastic Period. On the basis of the pottery, it is even possible to attribute a Second Dynasty date. This is not without importance, as it provides a missing link between the well-known Naqada III cemetery within the town walls and the recently excavated Third Dynasty mastaba on top of the rock necropolis.

Epigraphic research

Research on the history of a site is not limited to pure excavation work. Egyptologists should also protect existing monuments from deterioration, to ensure their survival for future generations. A meticulous documentation complements the conservation of monuments. A first initiative in this sphere was undertaken over a century ago by the British archaeologist Joseph John Tylor, who published several facsimiles of monuments from Elkab, such as the rock-cut tombs of Pahery, Reneny and Sobeknakht, and the temple of Amenhotep III. Subsequently, in 1971, the Belgian Egyptologist Philippe Derchain published two small temples situated in the Wadi Hilâl. Between 1979 and 1987, as already mentioned, the petroglyphs and rock inscriptions were recorded by Dirk Huyge and Hans Vandekerckhove, respectively.

In the 1980s, Vivian Davies developed an interest in the decorated tombs of the rock necropolis, particularly those of the late Second Intermediate Period and early New Kingdom. The epigraphic research and preservation program of his team has led to numerous positive results, most notably in the tomb of Sobeknakht, a governor of Elkab during the Seventeenth Dynasty. Cleaning revealed a previously unknown biographical inscription, which sheds new light on the hostile relations between Egypt and the Kingdom of Kush during this period.

Naturally, the Belgian mission also wished to contribute to epigraphic research within the rock necropolis of Elkab. In recent years, extended attention was paid to the study of the tomb of Setau, which lies outside the chronological frame of Vivian Davies’ investigations.

55 Hendrickx, Huyge and Warmenbol, Arch.-Nil 12, 51–3.
56 Derchain, Elkab I.
57 PM V, 177, 183, 185, 188.
58 Davies, Sudan and Nubia 7, 52–4.
The inscriptions in this tomb, not previously published in extenso, provide evidence that Setau was a high priest of the goddess Nekhbet during the Twentieth Dynasty, under the reigns of Ramesses III to Ramesses IX. He thus held this important position for around fifty years, from c.1175 to 1120 BC. During three seasons (two in 2000 and another at the end of 2005), a team of the Brussels Museum, with two more Egyptologists from the Université Libre de Bruxelles, have been working on meticulously copying, drawing (at a 1:1 scale) and photographing the scenes and inscriptions on the façade and interior walls of the tomb (figs. 39, 41–3).

Setau and his wife A’atmerut had many children, grandchildren and other relatives, who are all depicted inside the tomb, with their names and titles. This provides a treasure of genealogical and prosopographical information. But the tomb decoration contains more interesting elements. Ancient Egyptian art is typically anonymous, with a few exceptions: in general we do not know the identity of the artists and artisans that decorated tombs. In Elkab and at Hierakonpolis on the opposite bank of the Nile, several scribes or artists ‘signed’ their work in tombs by adding a short text with their names. This is particularly explicit in the tomb of Setau, where the scribe Merira, a man from Esna, depicted himself twice. The accompanying inscriptions state that he was proud to have been selected for providing the tomb of Setau with inscriptions (fig. 42). Furthermore, he emphasizes that he did not merely act as a simple artisan, but that he performed his duties ‘with his heart’ and that no ‘superior’ gave him any additional instructions hereto. In other words, he conceived and organized his own work. Of course, this may sound somewhat exaggerated, as, except for a few details, the layout of the entire eastern wall of the tomb chapel of Setau is almost a perfect copy of the corresponding wall in Pahery’s tomb, which is nearby and several centuries earlier in date.

Nonetheless, Merira was correct in two ways, as the tomb of Setau contains elements not found elsewhere. Firstly, the north wall of the tomb bears a long inscription containing a previously unknown and unpublished hymn to Nekhbet. The inscription has only been partially preserved, but the general nature of the text is clear. Secondly, although the west wall as well is rather damaged, there are still the remains of a scene depicting a barque bearing a shrine for the cult statue of Nekhbet (fig. 43). According to the accompanying inscription, this scene illustrates the statue of the goddess being taken by boat from the temple of Elkab to the royal residence of Per-Ramases, in the Delta, to attend the celebration of the king’s sed-festival, in year 29 of the reign of Ramesses III (around 1155 BC). To our knowledge, this scene is absolutely unique.

59 PM V, 181–2 (tomb no. 4); KRI V, 430, § 207; VI, 555–559. An extensive bibliography concerning the tomb of Setau will be published in Kruchten and Delvaux, Elkab VIII (forthcoming).

60 Hm-ntr tpy.

61 Jean-Marie Kruchten and Luc Delvaux, who are preparing the final publication of the tomb.


63 Spiegelberg, RT 24, 185–6.

64 Gardiner, ZA 48, 47–51.
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Fig. 1: The eastern mudbrick enclosure wall (with ramp giving access to the top), seen from inside. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.

Fig. 2: Somers Clarke’s house. Photo: Y. Elpers.
Fig. 3: Elkab and its surroundings (after F. Depuydt, *Elkab IV*, 28, fig. 11).
Fig. 4: Detail of the topographical map showing the central part (temple area) of the town (after F. Depuydt, *El køb IV*, inset map).
Fig. 5: The present remains of the temples of Nekhbet and Thoth. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.

Fig. 6: The temples of Nekhbet and Thoth at the time of Bonaparte’s expedition (DE I, pl. 66, fig.3).
Fig. 7: Blocks from a barque shrine of Sobekhotep III, found in the great courtyard of the temple of Nekhbet. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.

Fig. 8: Nagada III cemetery. Selection of calcite vessels. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.
Fig. 9: Part of the Greco-Roman village excavated between 1967 and 1982. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.

Fig. 10: The Wadi Hilâl, with one of the large sandstone hills, known as the 'rocher des vautours'. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.
Fig. 11: Part of the southern side of the rock necropolis. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.

Fig. 12: Rock inscription N 50 left by the 'Counselor (?) (dNty)' Sawikai (possibly the same as the owner of tomb BE 1; see fig. 16) and his son, the 'Chamberlain of the King (hry-tp nsw)' Idi. See Vandekerckhove & Müller-Wollermann, Elkab VI, 62, pl. 70d. Photo: A. Mekhitarian.
Fig. 13: Facsimile of rock inscription N 140 mentioning Sawikai, his son Ptahhotep, and his grandson Meniu. By H. Vandekerckhove (see Vandekerckhove & Müller-Wollermann, *Elkab VI*, 100–101, pl. 31).

Fig. 14: The eastern part of the rock necropolis seen from the south. The modern stairway and terrace (built in the early 1980s) give access to the New Kingdom tombs of Pahery, Setau, Ahmose-son-of-Ibana, and Reneny, which are now open to visitors. Photo: S. Hendrickx.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/bmsaes/issue_NO/AUTHOR.aspx
Fig. 15: Façade of the funerary chapel of Sawikai (tomb BE 1). The pit giving access to the burial chamber, located directly below the chapel, is visible in the foreground. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.

Fig. 16: Painted back wall of the chapel of Sawikai: deceased sitting in front of an offering table. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.
Fig. 17: Fragmentary ‘Maidum bowl’ with the name of Idi, possibly a son of Sawikai (cf. our fig. 12). Photo: CFBE, Brussels.

Fig. 18: Façade of the chapel of a Sixth Dynasty tomb (BE 7) discovered in November 1988. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.
Fig. 19: Concentration of coarse pottery covering the burial pit in front of tomb BE 7. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.

Fig. 20: Cross section of tomb BE 7. Drawing: D. Huyge.
Fig. 21: Tomb BE 7. The interior of chamber B before cleaning. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.

Fig. 22: Tomb BE 7, chamber B. Bronze mirror engraved with the name of the ‘acquaintance of the king and priestess of Hathor’ Irtenakhty. Drawing: F. Roloux.
Fig. 23: Tomb BE 7, chamber B. Position of the skeleton and the funerary objects. Drawing: D. Huyge.
Fig. 4: Tomb BE 7, the interior of chamber A after cleaning. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.

Fig. 5: Worker Hamid holding the copper hand basin with its companion ewer, found in chamber A of tomb BE 7. Photo: CFBE, Brussels.

Fig. 6: Entrance to the burial chamber of an unviolated tomb (BE 18) obstructed by a large slab of stone. Photo: MRAH, Brussels.

Fig. 7: Tomb BE 18: Bronze mirror decorated with two falcons (Eighteenth Dynasty). Photo: R. Mommaerts.
Fig. 28: Tomb BE 18: Bronze axe blade with openwork decoration (Eighteenth Dynasty).
Photo: R. Mommaerts.

Fig. 29: Selection of the grave gifts discovered in the unviolated Eighteenth Dynasty tomb.
Photo: MRAH, Brussels.
Fig. 30: Ointment vase assembled from two varieties of wood, creating alternate bright and dark bands. Photo: R. Mommaerts.

Fig. 31: Groundplan of the mastaba. Drawing by F. Roloux after an original plan by L. Moclants.

Fig. 32: The southeast corner of the mudbrick superstructure of the mastaba atop the rock necropolis. Photo: MRAH, Brussels.
Fig. 33: Offering niche near the northeast corner of the mastaba superstructure, with stands and jars. Photo: MRAH, Brussels.

Fig. 34: Two child skeletons discovered in the fill of the mastaba shaft. Photo: MRAH, Brussels.

Fig. 35: Detail of the outer decoration of a Twenty-first Dynasty coffin found in a small rock-cut chamber of the mastaba. Photo: MRAH, Brussels.
Fig. 36: Two small blue faience vases found in the fill of the mastaba shaft. Photo: MRAH, Brussels.

Fig. 37: Central part of the Second Dynasty cemetery during excavation. Photo: MRAH, Brussels.
Fig. 38: Second Dynasty cemetery, tomb 12. The grave is lined with stone slabs. Photo: MRAH, Brussels.

Fig. 39: Façade of the tomb of Setau. Stela next to the entrance. Photo: Y. Kobylecky.

Fig. 40: Dismembered body of a child deposited in a small woorden box. Photo: MRAH, Brussels.
Fig. 41: Tomb of Setau, east wall: Setau’s son-in-law, Merybast, consecrating offerings to the deceased and his wife A’atmerut. Photo: Y. Kobylecky.

Fig. 42: Tomb of Setau, south wall: the scribe Merira and one of his ‘signatures’. Photo: Y. Kobylecky.
Fig. 43: Tomb of Setau, west wall: part of the scene illustrating the journey of the cult statue of the goddess Nekhbet to Per-Ramses. Photo: Y. Kobylecky.