The British Museum survey of the Asyut region_Report Oct-Nov 2017

As submitted to the Ministry of Antiquities on 16 Nov 2017

The ‘British Museum survey of the Asyut region’ aims at documenting the pharaonic and post-pharaonic history and reconstructing the natural and archaeological environment of the Asyut region through time. The project has been concentrating on the village of Shutb.

The fourth field season took place from 22 October to 15 November 2017 and included Ilona Regulski (field director – Egyptologist), Niazy Mustafa Mohamed (field assistant), Khaled Abd el-Malik Abu Zeid (field assistant), Sylvie Marchand (pottery specialist), Judith Collis (geologist), Kris Strutt (geophysics), Ann-Cathrin Gabel (Egyptologist), Kelly Accetta (Egyptologist), Heba Shamaa (architect), Sara Kayser (archaeologist), Matjaz Kacicnik (photographer), Oliver Wilkins (cinematographer), Mustafa Naguib (assistant cinematographer). The SCA inspectorate was represented by inspectors Amina Mohamed Sabit and Hany Sabir Nabih, restorer Michael Nabil Gindi, and trainees Heba Ahmad Awas and Ines Mohamed Tawfik.

The work consisted of the following components:

1. Geological study of the landscape (by augur hand drill)
2. Geophysical survey using a magnetometer
3. Work in the magazine
   - Study (documentation including drawing) of pottery
   - Photography of objects and pottery
4. Engagement activities for raising awareness of the value of heritage in the modern village of Shutb

Since point 4 does not fall under the supervision of the Ministry of Antiquities, the report will not elaborate upon it. These activities were arranged in collaboration with the Asyut governorate and the umda.

1. Geological study of the landscape (by augur hand drill)

Through augering, the project hopes to (1) identify the periods at which the settlement of ancient Shashotep (modern Shutb) was occupied, (2) define the boundary of the ancient city at different periods, and (3) delineate the relationship between the city and the surrounding landscape. For example, inscriptions in the
tombs of Asyut suggest that Asyut and Shashotep were on the river during the First Intermediate period (2200BC).

The former basin divide and hôt boundaries as records of former Nile behaviour is not available in this area since it appears to have been laid out in a grid of fields around 200m square more recently, possibly during the Islamic period. This new grid covers the ancient structure of the landscape. Augering on either side of such divides, known from ancient maps, can determine whether sediments on one side suggest greater accumulation of water than the other. To test this hypothesis, several lines of boreholes with an augur hand-drill were made in the fields and gardens surrounding Shutb (see fig. 1, auger sites AS012-AS029). Based on the results of the previous auger season (Oct 2016), we focussed on the areas to the west of the tell.

The augering revealed that there is a blanket of sediment associated with the Mamluk irrigation scheme that is up to 3.5m thick. This sediment mantles the pre-existing topography rendering the landscape history of the area cryptic. The cumulated results from the cores so far suggest that there were a number of channels around the area at different points and indicate that Tell Shutb was already elevated above the floodplain during the Old Kingdom. The prevalence of river-lain sands around the flanks of the tell suggest that the ancient city may have been founded on an island. Pottery rich cores at AS017 and AS018 suggest that there may have been another outpost of the settlement to the west although its precise location cannot yet be determined. Forthcoming pottery dates are expected to provide tighter control on the periods of occupation and the correlations between deposits.

2. Geophysical survey using a magnetometer

Kris Strutt from Southampton University joined the mission for 6 days to test the potential of geophysical research in the fields and gardens of Shutb. Based on the results of the augering and pottery collected on the surface in Mar 2017, the following 3 areas were prioritised (see fig. 2):

a. The fields to the west of the tell (3 days)

b. The areas on either side of the magazine (1 day)

c. The fields on the east side of the modern village (1 day)

In general, the measurements experienced a lot of ‘noise’, i.e. walls and metal on the surface. Also, irrigation of the fields prevented us from working in some areas. As was suggested by the augering, a river channel bordered the western side of the ancient city. The magnetometer picked up structures just east of that channel, perhaps indicating the edge of the city. The date of these structures can only be confirmed by future excavations.

3. Work in the magazine
Work in the magazine focused on the study of the pottery from the auger sites (Oct 2016 and 2017) and the surface survey conducted in Mar 2017. In addition, the glazed pottery from the Mar 2016 trench was studied (by Sylvie Marchand; fig. 3).

a. Pottery from the augering seasons Oct 2016 and Oct 2017

The pottery from the augers can be dated to different periods. The augers closest to the tell yielded the oldest pottery; AS01, AS04 and AS029 yielded substantial Middle Kingdom pottery and AS029 even contained Old Kingdom sherds. The pottery discovered in the north, east and south of the tell was later with an overwhelming presence of Roman and Byzantine examples.

b. Pottery from the Mar 2017 survey

Most of the pottery that was picked up during the walking survey in March 2017 was late, except for a group attested close to AS12, which dates to the Middle Kingdom.

All objects and a selection of the pottery were photographed by Matjaz Kacicnik.

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Figures

Fig. 1: map showing the auger sites

Fig. 2: map showing magnetometry tests
Fig. 3: pottery from Shutb