



## THE DENDERA NECROPOLIS, 2014–2015

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The necropolis of Dendera covers an area of over a hundred hectares at the south of the temple complex. Partially excavated by Flinders Petrie in 1898 on behalf of the Egypt Exploration Fund,<sup>1</sup> and by Clarence Fisher from 1913 to 1917 for the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania,<sup>2</sup> this large sepulchral area was neglected by archaeologists for about a century. With several thousands of tombs, Dendera is one of the largest pharaonic cemeteries, partially excavated, and covering a wide chronological spectrum from the Early Dynastic Period until the Coptic Period. Like most Egyptian archaeological sites, the area of the necropolis is now threatened by the development of agricultural fields and modern villages. Since 2014 a new project associating the Institut français d'archéologie orientale (IFAO, Cairo), the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS, Belfort), the Oriental Institute (OI, Chicago), and Macquarie University (MU, Sydney) aims to resume the archaeological investigation of the site. Each of the three project partners is interested in a specific and complementary aspect of the site. Dr. Pierre Zigani (IFAO/CNRS) continued the architectural study of the temples; Dr. Grégory Marouard (OI) is interested in the pharaonic settlement area located at the east of the temple of Hathor; Dr. Yann Tristant (MU) is in charge of the resumption of the work on the necropolis and the geo-archaeological study of the Dendera area. The new project initiated on the necropolis aims to review all types of documentation currently available, to clean key areas that will enable a better understanding of the tombs and associated grave goods, and to conduct new investigations on untouched areas, with a particular interest for the Early Dynastic Period. This short report summarizes the work undertaken during the two first

seasons, 2014 and 2015, on the Dendera necropolis.

First season (Autumn 2014) was dedicated to the cleaning of the “Abu Suten” area considered by Petrie as the oldest part of the necropolis. Located 375 m from the southeast corner of the temples' enclosure wall, the group of mastabas explored by Petrie and re-excavated by Fisher is covered today with a 1- to 2-m-thick layer of rubbles and windblown sand. Two mastabas were completely cleaned during the season. Numbered 6:081 and 6:171 according to Fisher's classification, the tombs are built out of mud bricks on a rectangular plan, decorated with two niches on the facade. Very poorly conserved, they were preserved to a height of only one to five courses of bricks. In the central part of the study area, Mastaba 6:081 includes two vertical shafts (not cleaned) at the north and the south of the monument. Oriented southwest/northeast, the tomb is 21 m long and 10 m wide. South of the tomb, Mastaba 6:171 is a smaller monument, 11 m long and 6 m wide, also oriented southwest/northeast. Inside the mastaba only one shaft was dug at the south. A square feature of mud bricks at the north symbolizes a vertical shaft that was never dug. However, this feature is located above a small subterranean burial room (1 x 1.6 m), situated 3 m below the surface of the necropolis and accessible by a staircase dug into the substratum at the east of the mastaba. This could be an earlier tomb (Early Dynastic/early Old Kingdom) reused when 6:171 was built. The main mastaba of the group (6:181), attributed to *Ni-ibw-nws*, was not completely cleaned. Only the eastern façade, 21 m long, was cleared. The associated material includes only pottery fragments. Different types of beer jars, bread molds, and Meidum bowls indicate that the group of mastabas is dated to the end of the Third/beginning of the Fourth Dynasty.

The main objective of the second season (Autumn 2015) was to evaluate the potential of an area that has never been excavated. The limits of the Fisher's excavation are clearly visible on the ground. An area of about 30 x 15 m (450 m<sup>2</sup>) was cleaned at the edge of Fisher's Area 18 and Area 7. Despite its modest dimensions, the area is characterized by a high density of archaeological features, with fifteen graves identified during the work ranging from the First Intermediate to the Roman Period. Most of them have been looted during the antiquity. Two potential Early Dynastic tombs were excavated in Area 7 adjacent to the trench opened in Area 8. They have been found in an area labeled "Early Dynastic" on the map published by Henri Fischer in 1968. Burial 1120 is a small, shallow pit in which an adult woman (35–45 years old) was buried in a contracted position, on the left side, head to the southwest, in a wooden coffin. Most of the body was disturbed by Fisher when he excavated the tomb to check the presence of grave goods. He left inside the coffin a label with the number of the tomb in his own inventory (7:940.1). No pottery or other funerary equipment can confirm the date of the burial; however, the position, as well as the orientation of the body, suggests an Early Dynastic date. Close to B1120 in Area 7, 3 m to the northeast, burial B1119 contained the skeleton of a 6–9-year-old child in a small shallow pit also disturbed by previous excavation. Here again the size of the pit and the absence of funerary architecture suggest an Early Dynastic date despite the lack of material to confirm it.

The largest tomb excavated during the second season is a shaft group consisting of 10 rectangular pits surrounded by a rectangular mud brick enclosure. The

monument, oriented southwest/northeast, is 14 m long and 3 m wide. The pits are all parallel, oriented northwest/southeast, and have dimensions roughly similar, 2.2–2.3 x 0.7–0.8 m, with a depth of 2 to 4.6 m. In the bottom of three of these pits a burial chamber was dug at the east or west. In most cases the entrance of the burial chamber was still partially sealed by a mud-brick wall. The monument was plundered in antiquity and reused for more recent burials, including of young children without grave goods to date them. The material recovered from the pits includes late Eleventh–early Twelfth Dynasty hemispherical bowls, large globular jars, ovoid jars, and tubular bread molds, as well as fragments of at least four offerings trays. Late Ptolemaic/early Roman pottery (annular based bowls, amphorae, etc.) indicate that the tomb was plundered and reused when staircase tombs have been dug in the same area during the Graeco-Roman Period.

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<sup>1</sup> W. M. F. Petrie, *Denderah 1898*, Egypt Exploration Fund Memoir 17 (London: Kegan Paul, 1900).

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Fisher, "The Eckley B. Coxe Jr. Egyptian Expedition," *The Museum Journal* 8 (1917): 211–237; H. G. Fischer, *Dendera in the Third Millennium B.C. down to the Theban Domination of Egypt* (Locust Valley, NY: Augustin, 1968); R. A. Slater, "Denderah and the University Museum 1898–1970," *Expedition* 12 (1970): 15–20; R. A. Slater, *The Archaeology of Denderah in the First Intermediate Period*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1974).