



TWO CITIES AT SAIS: A PROTOCAPITAL?

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INTRODUCTION

Recent work at Sais (Sa el-Hagar) has focused on understanding the complex stratigraphy of the northern part of the archaeological site at Kom Rebwa in the Northern Enclosure. Excavation by the Durham University/Egypt Exploration Society/SCA mission from 2000–2004 recovered evidence for a late Ramesside house with a storehouse-magazine.¹ The pottery assemblage of the house and magazine were largely intact, although fragmentary, lying on the floor of the structures as if the roof had collapsed upon the material, crushing the vessels *in situ*. As only part of the house was excavated in the time available, further work has been undertaken since 2012 in order to find the extent of the house-magazine structure and whether the building collapse was localized or more extensive. The initial findings of the work suggest that not only is the late Ramesside town extensively preserved and over a wide area, but that there is a further town built upon the ruins of the earlier town and that it is also well preserved in several phases. The date of this town is discussed here and the potential for it to be a proto-capital at Sais between the late Ramesside and Saite period.

THE LATE RAMESSIDE HOUSE AND MAGAZINE

The part of the house excavated now comprises a courtyard with attached oven in a kitchen area, the main room of the house with part of the eastern side missing and a dais and column occupying the southern side of the room, the entrance to a magazine on the western side, with dimensions of 7 m by 7 m and part of a second magazine at a higher level than the first magazine and perhaps belonging to another structure lying west of the excavated area. All of the rooms of the house and magazines contained intact assemblages of pottery in groups of

complete fragments. The magazine seems to have been used for food preparation and for the storage of large vessels including amphorae of Egyptian forms, globular jars of varying sizes, and large plates or lids. The final phase of the floor of the magazine was covered with signs of burning and patches of orange and white decayed organic material (Fig. 1). The date of the building depends upon a reconstructed Canaanite amphora from the main room of the house, which dates to the mid-12th century BCE, although it may have been reused and so the actual date of the assemblage could be later. The second magazine was separated from the first magazine by a narrow wall and may have had two stories, as one layer of pottery was found directly underneath a second layer separated by mud and organic remains. Four complete fragmentary Canaanite amphorae similar in type to the first amphora and several Egyptian amphorae were found in these layers.

THE THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD WALL AND ASSOCIATED STRUCTURES

After the Ramesside house had collapsed, the rubble was flattened off and pitted areas seem to have been filled in with burnt ash or earth. A large wall was constructed, partially running along the west wall of the main room and partially through the magazine of the underlying house. Separate rooms were built against the large wall, using it as a structural focus and using the underlying walls of the earlier structures as foundations, so they must have been visible to the later builders. One main room was excavated in 2012 consisting of two main phases of a domestic or food preparation area. The earliest room had a long, narrow form with a hearth built onto center of the western wall; in the later phase, the room was partitioned



FIGURE 1: The magazine floor of the late Ramesside house, view to the north.

into two and a new hearth was built in the center of the northern wall. A second, “domestic” room built directly against the wall was excavated in 2015–2016, with many floors and phases of use as suggested by the domestic bowls and jar fragments found in it; in the second, main phase of use, the room had a curved wall built from north to south creating a triangular room at the north with narrow entrance and a large room to the south (Fig. 2). The triangular room may have been used as kiln or a storeroom, which had been burnt, as the fill was very black with charcoal fragments and the walls slightly blackened. The narrow entrance was, perhaps, a stokehole with stone slabs used to close it. The corpus of pottery objects includes some unique forms including wheels or molds for pottery vessels and a domed structure, with an opening that closed with a sliding



FIGURE 2: The burnt room with pottery deposits, view to the west.



FIGURE 3: Pottery “trap” from the burnt room; length, 27 cm.

door, that may have been a trap for some kind of animal (Fig. 3).

The date of the later phases associated with the large wall is sometime in the Third Intermediate Period but cannot yet be more precisely determined until further detailed research on the pottery assemblages has been carried out. The time between the collapse of the Ramesside house and the later TIP phase is also not clear, and it is hoped that further work and dating of charcoal remains may provide a more definite date for the rich corpus of pottery from the excavation.

SUMMARY D

The findings from Kom Rebwa have exceeded our expectations in that the whole of this part of the site, covering around 2 hectares, may contain the remains of two cities, one built upon another at a time when Sais was changing from a provincial center into a state capital. Sais

offers a unique opportunity to study such a change at a domestic level and at the level of two well-preserved moments in time. The way in which the later structures mirror and use the earlier buildings also suggests an interesting knowledge of the past city and the way in which it could be merged with the later, built environment perhaps for reasons for scale and economy as much as ideology and concern for the past.

EES/DURHAM UNIVERSITY EXPEDITION TO SAIS WEBSITE:
<https://community.dur.ac.uk/penelope.wilson/sais.html>

¹ Penelope Wilson et al., *Sais I: The Ramesside Period–Third Intermediate Period at Kom Rebwa*, Egypt Exploration Society Excavation Memoir 98 (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2011).