Quesna: the Ptolemaic and Roman cemetery

In 2006 an EES-sponsored geophysical survey revealed that a significant proportion of burials at the site of Quesna in Minufiyeh lay undetected beneath the sand. At the Society’s London Study Day in December 2007 members heard of the results of the first season of renewed investigations into the site’s cemeteries, here described by Joanne Rowland and Sonia Zakrzewski.

Following the geophysical survey at Quesna in 2006 (see EA 30 pp.33–35), in the 2007 season of the Minufiyeh Archaeological Survey test trenches were opened at the site to study further the population buried during Ptolemaic and Roman times. Quesna was initially investigated through excavation and test trenches in the 1990s by the SCA, having been first discovered in the late 1980s during sand clearance to the south of the site. The SCA investigations have been reported by Farouk Gomaa and El-Sayed Hegazy in 2001.

The magnetometer survey in 2006 had been successful in revealing the extent of the sub-surface archaeology and the 2007 season began with a topographical survey of the site in preparation for the digging of new exploratory trenches.

One trench (Trench 2) was located to ascertain whether the structure west of the falcon necropolis served as its entrance structure, while another (Trench 1) investigated the relationship between the burials of the mausoleum and those lying immediately to its west. It is the results of the work in Trench 1 that will be described here.

The SCA excavations had already exposed a brick-built mausoleum dating to the Late Period and Ptolemaic Period, and inscriptions on the stone sarcophagus of Wajan found within this had confirmed that rulers from ancient Athribis (modern Tell Atrib at nearby Benha) were amongst those buried at Quesna. What was unknown at the start of our investigations, however, was the diversity of the population who used Quesna as a sacred site; both for burial and for offerings to the falcon god, Horus. Continuing surface survey and drill coring around this Pleistocene gezira, or turtleback, are aimed at locating ancient settlements in the vicinity of Quesna and are reported in JEA 93 (2007) pp.65–77. Topographic survey...
during the 2007 season included the mapping of the mausoleum, and investigations of this structure during the mapping clarified a number of issues. First, the buildings that comprise the mausoleum are not mutually accessible, that is, one has to walk around to the front or back of the mausoleum to move between the main units. Furthermore, the northernmost area exposed to date has clearly been oriented at a sharper easterly angle than the adjoining structures, which suggests that the mausoleum grew organically rather than having been constructed to one plan.

By the end of the 2007 season the skeletal remains of 29 individuals, buried within 18 graves, had been uncovered within Trench 1 (6m × 10m) adjacent to the mausoleum. Notably, 21 of these individuals had been buried on a west-east orientation, with 20 lying with their heads to the west. The remaining eight individuals had been placed on a north-south orientation, with all but one oriented with the head to the north. During excavation it was possible to discern that a number of the east-west burials cut the north-south burials, leading us to deduce that the east-west burials had been made later, and hence that they are probably Roman in date.

The SCA investigations had also uncovered a number of Ptolemaic and Roman coffins, of a type which is recorded throughout Egypt and has been discussed by L Cotelle-Michel, Les sarcophages en terre cuite en Égypte et en Nubie de l’époque prédynastique à l’époque romaine (2004). During the 2007 field season, five additional ceramic (or ‘terracotta’) coffins were uncovered. These coffins, three of which were of the ‘double-vessel’ type and two of the ‘tray’ type, were left unopened in the backfilled trench for investigation in a future season. Grave (Gr.) 1012, a double-vessel coffin, was found with the lower limbs of what might have been an Isis Aphrodite statuette. In addition, three
mud-brick ‘coffins’ were exposed, two for individual burials and one for multiple interments. Gr.1005 is a coffin-shaped mud-brick lined grave oriented north-south, with the head of the skeleton to the north. The grave was constructed with two courses of mud-brick tracing the outline of the body, which was laid directly on to the sand. A third course capped the grave, sealing the body within. As a result of the protection afforded by the mud-brick, the bones were fairly well preserved. The extended supine skeleton, with arms crossed (right over left) over the chest, belonged to an adult female who had no teeth and is estimated to have been between approximately 45 and 60 years old at death. The other mud-brick grave excavated during the season, Gr.1014, was mud-brick lined and possibly originally covered with a course of mud-bricks; it contained the skeletal remains of six individuals, buried in three layers (the plan on p.16 shows the top layer).

Of all of the burials found thus far in Trench 1, only two contained noteworthy cultural material, both in connection with protection of the body. First, a ceramic sherd incised with the wedjet-eye was found in the fill of the mud-brick grave Gr.1014. Secondly, a high number of gypsum/plaster pieces, mainly what may be described as amulets, were found in association with a north-south oriented burial (Gr.1019). These included a Hathor head, a winged vulture, plaques with deities, scarabs, buttons, a feline figure a baboon figure, a Djed pillar and a human-headed sphinx. Remains of a face mask were also found over the skull of the deceased in Gr.1019. So far, both ears, part of the nose and eyes have been recovered, enabling a preliminary reconstruction of the mask to be made by the conservator. Hopefully, more pieces may be added to the puzzle in 2008.

In addition to the presence of amulets in both these burials, they are similar for another reason which may indicate that the two individuals were related. Both the persons interred in Gr.1019 and the uppermost burial (found without its skull) in Gr.1014 were affected by a pathological condition resulting in late-aged unfused epiphyses of the long bones and the bones of the hands and feet. Both individuals were also tall in stature, with bone robusticity suggesting that they were male. The orientation of the individual in Gr.1019 was striking, as this is the only interment found within this trench to have been buried in a north-south orientation with the head to the south.

In spring 2008 the team hope to return to Quesna to continue the analysis of the human skeletal remains found during the last season to provide new evidence on the health of those buried at the site. In addition, drill coring in the low ground around the gezira may reveal more about the places in which they lived.

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