



Excavations in Dra Abu el-Naga

In 1990 the German Institute of Archaeology, Cairo, launched a new long-term archaeological project at Dra Abu el-Naga in the Theban necropolis. By its fourth year the excavation had become a joint project with the University of California, Los Angeles. **Daniel Polz**, director of the expedition, outlines the results of the first five years' work.



Outer courts of the rock tomb, showing Coptic structures, the second pylon and parts of the original floor

With the exception of some decorated rock-cut tombs, mostly known since last century, the Dra Abu el-Naga cemetery has been neglected by scholars and archaeologists for the last 70 years. The aim of the current project is the excavation, documentation and publication of this royal and private cemetery of the Second Intermediate Period and early New Kingdom. It is hoped not only to contribute to our knowledge of funerary and burial customs, but also to our understanding of the sociological and administrative structure behind the 'dawn of the New Kingdom'.

Dra Abu el-Naga is the modern Arabic name for a small village on the West Bank of Thebes; it also refers to an area north-east of the village which has never been settled and which, together with the hillside, forms the concession of the project. The past five years' excavations have yielded discoveries both in the plain at the northern end of the concession, where a number of undisturbed private tombs have been

revealed, with mud-brick superstructures of a type hitherto unknown in the Theban necropolis or elsewhere in Egypt, and in a hillside area, which may prove to be the location of the lost royal tombs, and is also the site of a previously unknown Ramesside temple-like structure.

In the plain some 40 tomb-shafts have been found, each with two underground chambers and some also with superstructures. All superstructures and shafts excavated so far date to the late Second Intermediate Period and the early New Kingdom.

From the outset, the archaeological importance of these discoveries needs to be emphasised: for the first time, questions concerning funeral architecture and burial practices of the lower and middle classes in the early New Kingdom may be answered. Until now it was unknown where the majority of the inhabitants of Thebes were buried, how and where the funerary ceremonies took place, and how and where grave goods



accompanying the individual burials were deposited. The results of the Dra Abu el-Naga excavations enable us to answer some of these questions with a high degree of accuracy.

The excavated tombs contained in some cases an individual burial, but in others as many as 20 to 25 burials. Great variety in the quality of burials and burial equipment was evident. On the one hand, there were 'rich' burials in painted wooden anthropoid coffins with inlaid bronze eyes, accompanied by a number of superbly manufactured and polished stone vessels, or canopic jars with stoppers in the form of human heads, plus other valuable grave goods. On the other hand there were 'poor' burials, some even sharing a single poor-quality wooden coffin, with grave goods consisting of only a couple of pottery storage jars. Other individuals, mostly children, were not buried in coffins but merely wrapped in mats or linen.

The excavated superstructures also provide new information concerning the architecture for funerary ceremonies of private individuals. The free-standing structures are built of mud-brick and all follow the same layout: to the east is a large entrance wall ('pylon'), sometimes with sloping sides; this gives access westwards to a large open court flanked by walls, north and south, probably less than man-size in height. In the centre of the court is the tomb shaft, with two chambers below; opposite the entrance to the court is a small chapel which originally had a brick-vaulted roof.



Lids of canopic jars from an undisturbed Eighteenth Dynasty tomb



Sandstone fragment from the second court of the rock tomb, showing the face of Hathor and the name of the High Priest of Amun *Ramessesnakht*



Limestone stela of a Songstress of Amun (name defaced) from an undisturbed tomb

In a number of chapels the remains of a small brick pedestal for an offering plate were found; behind one stood a decorated and inscribed limestone stela.

These superstructures clearly provided the stage for the funeral rites and burial ceremonies for all the individuals interred, probably regardless of social rank. The different social levels represented by the burials in the tomb chambers below indicate that not only the close relatives of the nucleus family were buried here but also other members of the tomb-owner's household.

Thus an answer can at last be offered as to where approximately 70-80% of the population of Thebes was buried. That the excavated tomb complexes had not been disturbed since the time of the last interments allows for accurate calculations concerning the overall number of burials. We may now conservatively conclude that during the early part of the New Kingdom an estimated 17,000 persons were buried in this necropolis - a number that fits well with ideas about the population size of Thebes at that time.

The second major aim of the project is to locate the royal tombs of the 17th Dynasty, none of which have been positively identified. The main reason for postulating the location of royal tombs in the Dra Abu el-Naga area is that, from the 1820s to the 1860s, objects from royal burials of the 17th Dynasty were discovered here. It is now certain that these objects were not



The superstructure of a private tomb complex

found *in situ*, but rather in secondary ‘caches’ where they were hidden by tomb robbers. A number of surveys were carried out by our expedition in search of the lost royal burials; three or four large rock-cut tombs in the hills of Dra Abu el-Naga were selected as possible targets for exploration.

The excavation of one tomb began in Spring 1993 and, although the results have not yet provided any definite proof of the identity of the original owner, the location, dimensions, and architectural layout indicate that it was not originally a private tomb. The outer part of the monument consists of two unusual large forecourts, separated by a massive stone wall. The rock-cut tomb ‘proper’ has a small entrance passage, followed by a large hall with four pillars. Between the pillars is a vertical shaft with exceptional dimensions: it is approximately 10 metres deep and 3.5 by 2.5 metres wide. The bottom of the shaft opens into a passage which leads to the burial place, an anthropoid recess sunk into the floor, which once contained the coffin of the tomb-owner. Unfortunately, the passage was absolutely empty, apparently cleared by representatives of the *Service des Antiquites* during the early 1920s. The dimensions of the subterranean passage (2.4 by 2.6 metres) are exceptionally large and it would appear virtually impossible that this passage was constructed for a private individual.

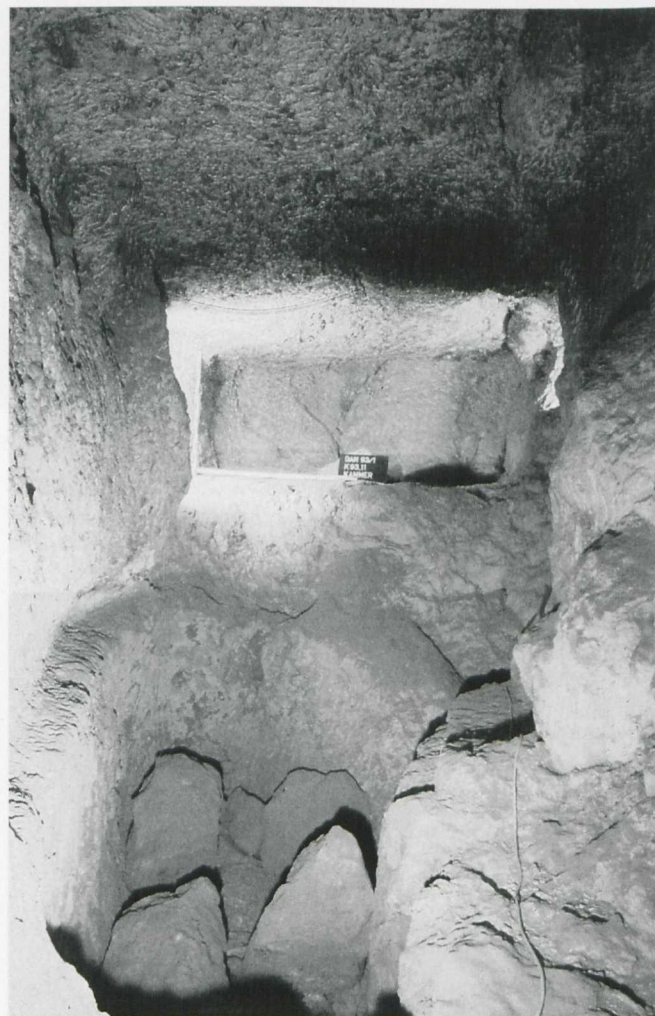
Work on this tomb complex was continued during the field seasons of 1994 and 1995, with excavations in the two outer courts. Although there is little further direct evidence concerning the original owner of the tomb, the objects discovered point to a royal burial place: numerous fragments of inscribed and decorated sandstone and limestone blocks mention several well-known high officials of the 18th to 20th Dynasties.

In front of the first court the remains of a mud-brick structure were uncovered which, according to numerous brick stamps, was erected by the Mayor of Thebes, Amenemhab (owner of Theban tomb A8, dating to the end of the 18th Dynasty). A substantial number of stamped bricks found in the inside of the tomb shows that the vizier Paser (TT 106) was the builder of another brick structure. The well-known scribe of the necropolis, Qenherkhepeshef, erected a limestone stela in the second court; likewise the High Priest of Amun,

Ramessesnakht (attested from the reign of Ramesses IV to that of Ramesses IX) built a huge temple-like structure of sandstone, covering both courts. The Divine Adoratrice Isis, a daughter of Ramesses VI, was responsible for yet another sandstone building, presumably somewhere in the second court. All these high-ranking individuals must have had a particular reason for erecting buildings or stelae here.

To date, the only plausible explanation for this remarkable interest is that this tomb must have been considered exceptionally important. Such importance could only be due to its association with a famous figure of the past, a king, probably of the 17th or early 18th Dynasty. Royal tombs of that period still remain unknown today, while the plain below is occupied by an extensive burial ground of the same period, as our project has revealed. It is highly probable, then, that our rock-cut tomb originally belonged to one of the kings of the 17th or early 18th Dynasty, perhaps even to Amenhotep I who, during Ramesside times, was venerated more than any other previous monarch.

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Interior of the rock tomb, showing the coffin-shaped recess in the passage floor and the small chamber at the rear