Re-materialising "state formation": Hierakonpolis 2.0

Richard Bussmann

(PLATE I)

The paper discusses the potential of a cross-institutional online database centred on objects from Hierakonpolis. The site is pivotal for understanding the emergence of Pharaonic kingship and archaic states in North Eastern Africa and the Middle East during the late 4th and early 3rd millennium BCE. While objects such as the Narmer palette and the ivory figurines from the temple area of Hierakonpolis are crucial in the debate, the brief excavation reports produced by J. Quibell and F. Green obscure their archaeological context. This has prevented a "thick" understanding of the evidence necessary to substantiate swift theoretical assumptions. It is argued that the database will help define a local perspective on large-scale social transformation and contextualise modern abstract notions such as "state formation" in the material environment of the people living in the ancient settlement. This underexplored perspective shows that the database would combine a clear research aim with the collection of data and objects. The database may stimulate fresh fieldwork and conservation at the site, which is suffering badly from natural and human destruction. The appeal of the exceptionally well preserved objects from Hierakonpolis to museum visitors offers an opportunity to channel public interest in archival research and increase awareness of the need for site and object conservation.

Local horizons of "state formation" in the material world

Hierakonpolis, ancient Nekhen, is one of the central places of Pharaonic "state formation" and a key site for exploring the emergence of early complex societies in cross-cultural research.[1]   The Predynastic and a few later remains are located on the modern flat desert strip and along the wadis leading up to the high plateau of the desert (pl. I, I). The Early Dynastic temple and town area lies in the modern cultivation opposite Nekheb / Elkab, the ancient twin city of Hierakonpolis. Today, the village Kom el-Ahmar occupies part of the site.

The temple and town area was first excavated by the British J. Quibell and F. Green in 1897-99, revisited by J. Garstang and H. Jones in 1905 and by Lansing

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1.   Cf. e.g., N. YOFFEE, *Myths of the Archaic State. Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations*, Cambridge 2005; E.C. KÖHLER, *Theories of State Formation*, in W. WENDRICH (ed.), *Egyptian Archaeology*, Oxford - Malden - Chichester 2010, pp. 36-54.

in 1932, surveyed by K. Butzer and W. Kaiser in 1957, and partly re-excavated
by W. Fairservis and M. Hoffman in the 1970s-90s.[2]   The standard of exca-
vation and publication has been low throughout although individual members
of the teams, such as Green and Hoffman, had a better sense of the difficul-
ties the archaeology of the settlement offered. Two archaeological fieldwork
missions are currently working at Hierakonpolis. One is headed by R. Friedman
and concentrates on the desert areas;[3]   the other is led by E. Walters, former
member of the Fairservis team, and re-investigates the temple and town area.[4]

The Quibell and Green excavation has raised the greatest excitement
for Hierakonpolis due to the discovery of iconic pieces such as the Narmer
palette with the first monumental representation of Pharaonic kingship, other
monumental palettes, mace heads, and stone vessels, and a set of fine pieces of
ivory artwork.[5]   Parallel to the on-going fieldwork in the 1970s, Barbara Adams
published a synthesised version of Green's manuscripts in transcription indi-
cating of find context and the present location of objects distributed across
the UK, Europe, and the US.[6]   The following graph shows the distribution
of 2,346 objects mentioned in Adams' publications, *i.e.* from Quibell's, Green's
and Garstang's excavations. The collections with the largest numbers of objects
are the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge (29%) — this
includes objects originally given to the former Faculty of Oriental Studies in
Cambridge and transferred to the MAA in the 1990s — the Petrie Museum
in London (24%) and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford which received the
majority of ivory objects (17%). The British Museum has not received objects
from these excavations. The types of objects distributed to individual museums

2.   The history of excavations in this part of Hierakonpolis is conveniently summarised by B. ADAMS,
     Ancient Nekhen. Garstang in the City of Hierakonpolis, New Malden 1995, pp. 3-20.
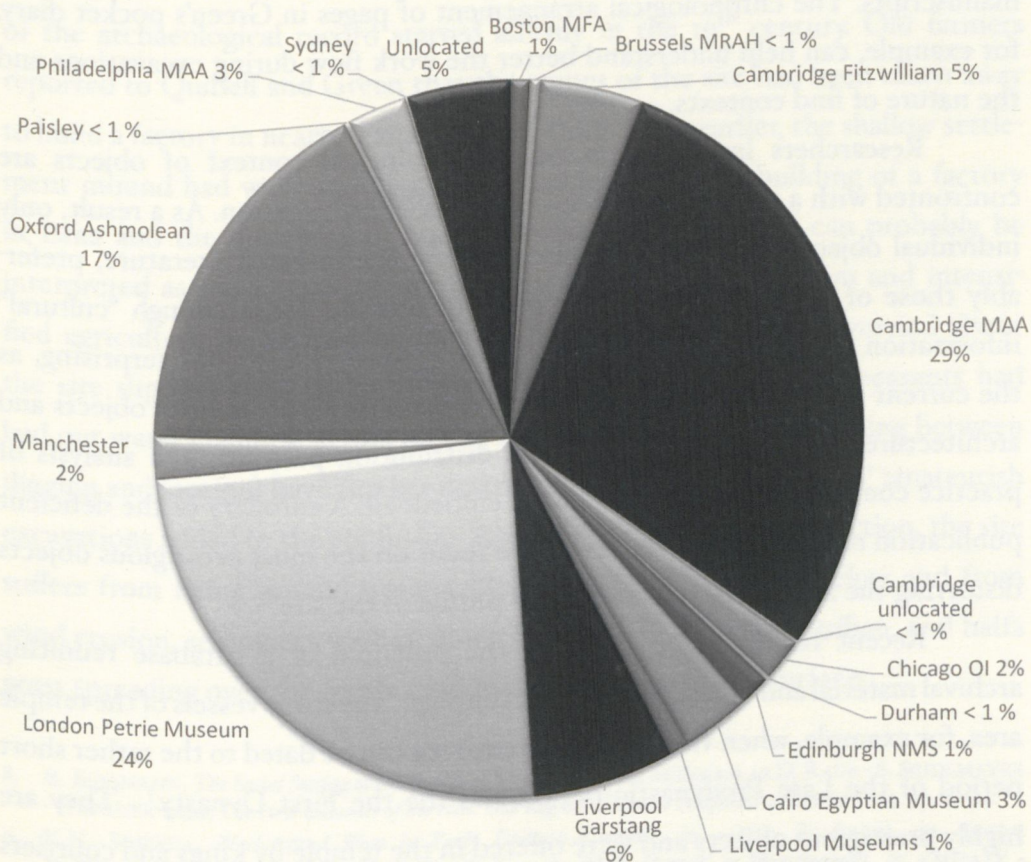
3.   Cf. <www.hierakonpolis-online.org> for latest results and further reading.

4.   E. WALTERS, *Women in the Cult of Isis at Hierakonpolis*, in Z. HAWASS - L. PINCH BROCK (eds), *Egyptology
     at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century: Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Egyptologists*,
     Cairo 2000, II, Cairo 2003, pp. 558-65; D.P. GOLD - R. PARIZEK - S.S. ALEXANDER - E.J. WALTERS,
     Development of a Strategy for Groundwater Control to Preserve the Temple-town of Hierakonpolis, in HAWASS -
     PINCH BROCK (eds), *Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Egyptologists*, III, pp. 196-203.

5.   J.E. QUIBELL - F.W. GREEN, *Hierakonpolis I*, London 1900; IID., *Hierakonpolis II*, London 1902.

6.   B. ADAMS, *Ancient Hierakonpolis*, London 1974; EAD., *Ancient Hierakonpolis. Supplement*, London 1974;
     EAD., *Ancient Nekhen*.

vary although the standard share for the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and major UK and US museums usually included a few fine ivory objects, some stone vessels, and a series of mace heads. In contrast, the MAA in Cambridge received flint implements, pottery, and many fragmented stone vessels, *i.e.* objects of lesser aesthetic appeal. The numbers of objects is likely to rise with future research but the graph does give a first impression of the miniscule amount of objects that have remained in Egypt. These include, however, the Narmer palette which some may argue is the most important object recovered from the site.

Graph showing the distribution of 2,346 objects excavated by Quibell, Green and Garstang at Hierakonpolis. Numbers after ADAMS, *Hierakonpolis*; EAD., *Hierakonpolis. Supplement*; EAD., *Ancient Nekhen*.

Adams' work demonstrates the overwhelming wealth of material excluded from Quibell's and Green's brief and often contradictory excavation reports and will remain foundational for future research on objects and archival material. However, her publications are in parts difficult to use and incomplete. Adams compiled the data in columns correlating the location and description of a find spot with the location and description of objects found at this find spot, the current location and accession numbers of objects, and relevant manuscripts. Her tabulated presentaton obscures the however limited coherence of the manuscripts. The chronological arrangement of pages in Green's pocket diary, for example, can help understand better the work flow during excavations and the nature of find contexts.

Researchers interested in the archaeological context of objects are confronted with a promising but confusing set of information. As a result, only individual objects are picked for discussion in the research literature, preferably those of aesthetic appeal that seem to provide dense enough "cultural" information to exclude their archaeological context. This is not surprising, as the current state of knowledge hampers research on association of objects and architecture, quantitative analysis, find distribution patterns, and analysis of practice contexts in which objects were embedded. A corollary of the deficient publication record is an almost exclusive focus on the most prestigious objects distorting the actual material and social profile of the site.

Recent research demonstrates the potential of a database reuniting archival material and objects from Hierakonpolis. The stone vessels of the temple area, for example, when viewed in their entirety, can be dated to the rather short period of the Late Predynastic period and the the First Dynasty.[7]   They are highly prestigious objects and were offered in the temple by kings and courtiers of this period, *i.e.* by those individuals represented on the Narmer palette. This lends something like a material "reality" to the representation on the palette previously not recognized. The quantitative comparison of the entire votive

7.   R. BUSSMANN, *Die Provinztempel Ägyptens von der 0.–11. Dynastie. Archäologie und Geschichte einer gesellschaftlichen Institution zwischen Residenz und Provinz*, Boston - Leiden 2010, pp. 396-401.

assemblage from Hierakonpolis with material from other temples of the third millenium demonstrates that the massive presence of royal and elite objects in the temple of Hierakonpolis was exceptional and restricted to this temple, rather than reflecting ubiquitous royal patronage of Egyptian temples across Egypt.[8] Thus, while Egyptian "state formation" affected the entire region of North Eastern Africa, royal agency is limited in scope. Adams' object lists have also encouraged work on individual objects, including their conservation, and stimulated new interpretative models for the Early Dynastic temple.[9]

It is somewhat frightening how little is visible in the field today of what must have been there when Quibell and Green arrived (pl. 1, 2). The decline of the archaeological record started already in the 19th century. Old farmers reported to Quibell and Green that the stones of the site had been taken away to build a factory in nearby Esna and that, thirty years earlier, the shallow settlement mound had walls standing six meters high.[10] The building of a factory in Esna and the quarrying of bud bricks on industrial scale can probably be interpreted as the impact of 19th century Egyptian industrialism and intensified agriculture on archaeological sites.[11] Quibell and Green worried about the site slipping soon under cultivation, partially because local peasants had laid out water channels across it. The 1897-99 excavations (something between digging and looting) have further destructed the site and Fairservis' amateurish excavations added to the confusion. Apart from man-made destruction, the site suffers from rising ground water table and salinization from below and from wind erosion, sediments washed down from the Wadi Abu el-Suffian, and halfa grass spreading over the fertile mud bricks underneath the surface.

8. R. BUSSMANN, *The Social Setting of the Temple of Satet in the Third Millenium*, in D. RAUE - S. SEIDLMAYER - P. SPEISER (eds), *The First Cataract of hte Nile. One Region – Diverse Perspectives*, Mainz 2013, pp. 21-34.

9. K.N. SOWADA, *Black-topped Ware in Early Dynastic Contexts*, in «JEA» 85 (1999), pp. 85-102; H. WHITEHOUSE, *A Decorated Knife Handle from the 'Main Deposit' at Hierakonpolis*, in «MDAIK» 58 (2002), pp. 425-46; L. MCNAMARA, *The Revetted Mound at Hierakonpolis and Early Kingship. A Re-Interpretation*, in B. MIDANT-REYNES - Y. TRISTANT - J. ROWLAND - S. HENDRICKX (eds), *Egypt at Its Origins 2. Proceedings of the International Conference "Origin of the State. Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt", Toulouse (France), 5th–8th September 2005*, Leuven - Paris - Dudley 2008, pp. 901-36; R. BUSSMANN, *The Seals and Seal Impressions from Hierakonpolis*, in «Egyptian Archaeology» 38 (Spring 2011), pp. 17-19.

10. QUIBELL - GREEN, *Hierakonpolis II*, p. 26.

11. D.M. BAILEY, *Sebakh, Sherds and Survey*, in «JEA» 85 (1999), pp. 211-18.

The first more detailed modern description of Hierakonpolis is offered by V. Denon. He visited the site in 1799 as a member of Napoleon's mission to Egypt and made a pencil drawing which depicts him as a painter in a landscape with a ruined gate in the front and another structure at the far horizon.[12]   Despite its fictional nature, the drawing can be interpreted in conjunction with Denon's description in the text as representing a Late Period temple (or city?) wall, vanished today, and the fort of Khasekhemwy.[13]   The history of the site between the Ptolemies and the early 19th century has not yet been explored.

Similar to other monumental temples, the walls and foundations of the later temple of Hierakonpolis were probably built of re-used stone blocks. Among them might have been the Middle Kingdom Royal kings and private statues kept today in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (CG 422, 423, 425). They were registered in the *Journal d'Entrée* in 1889 and 1892, *i.e.* prior to Quibell's and Green's work at the site, and probably came to light during the destruction of the site in the 19th century. These comments demonstrate that an object database needs to be set against the local site formation process, including its political underpinnings, in order to understand how the objects sit in the wider context of the site and its history.

These considerations draw attention to the local dimension of "state formation" and raise questions of how it materialises at Hierakonpolis. The relevance of a local perspective lies in the fact that it challenges swift theoretical assumptions and brings people and their physical world back on the agenda. In conjunction with current excavations the database will facilitate answers to question such as: How does the material record from Hierakonpolis reflect environmental, historical, and political developments from prehistory to the modern day? How has "state formation" transformed local worlds of material consumption, or, to frame it more broadly, how has "state formation" changed human experience of the material world at Hierakonpolis? Does re-material-

12. V. DENON, *Voyages dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte, pendant les compagnes de Bonaparte, en 1798 et 1799*, Londres 1817, pp. 195-96.

13. For a discussion cf. R. FRIEDMAN, *The Fort Forgotten*, in « Nekhen News » 23 (2011), p. 25; R. BUSSMANN, *Urbanism and Temple Religion in Egypt. A comment on Hierakonpolis*, in « JEA », forthcoming.

ising "state formation" cross-culturally help achieve a deeper understanding of the transformation of minds masked by the theoretical discourse?

Creation and dissemination of knowledge

The idea of the database arises primarily out of a frustration with the disparate fragmentation of knowledge. Different from databases of institutions with a given data set, the Hierakonpolis database would establish a site-specific body of knowledge across institutions. This impacts on the structure of the database and the way it will be presented to funding institutions to whose tune it will dance. The discussion above shows how the database can be embedded in a research agenda. The following paragraphs put up for discussion some open questions of a pragmatic and ethical nature.

Outline of the database

The database is an academic research tool in the first place and includes information on individual objects, find context, archival material and publications. The focus is currently placed on an estimated number of 2,500 objects excavated by Quibell and Green in 1897-1899 and by Garstang and Jones in 1905. The archival material includes information written on objects (*e.g.* find context number), register cards and additional material in museums and Green's digging diaries kept at Cambridge University and the British Museum. Illustrations of objects and archival material should be provided where possible (*e.g.* link to photos in existing online databases).

Accessibility and quality

The open access format is essentially seen as a progress over previous individuated publications. The multi-dimensional searching options will increase the potential for higher level research, such as quantitative analysis, spatial distribution of objects at the site and assessment of materials used. The resolution of information is aimed to be high, quality to be prioritised over quantity. The

quality of illustrations and photos depends on availability. Ideally, a click on a low resolution image should open a window with a high resolution photo.

Inclusion and exclusion

The database cuts out a rather arbitrary chunk of data which affords explanation on an introductory website. Parts of the material excavated in the 1970s-90s are currently being re-studied.[14]   On-going excavations are primarily based outside the temple and town area. This makes it difficult to establish the border of the database and a definite decision on the matter is not yet taken.

Classification

The entries in the database, *e.g.* materials, object type, or find context, afford classification in the English language. Scroll-down menus will help channel the search. Other than that, one will have to get away with the often imperfect, misleading, ambiguous, and disciplinarily entangled system of classification.

Hierarchy of objects

Information on context will vary from object to object. As a general rule, more details are available for prestigious objects whereas pottery and flint implements, for example, are less consistently mentioned in the reports and digging diaries, were left at the site, or are difficult to identify in the museum because no find context number or site provenance is written on them. A full picture of the material culture discovered during excavation is therefore beyond the reach of the database but should be aimed for in order to prevent a purely elitist reading of the site.

Find context

Find context is a difficult entity in the case of Hierakonpolis because it needs discussion of whether it is a sealed context, how an object came into its final position in which it has been found, and how find assemblages relate to standing

14. G. DI PIETRO, *Nekhen 10N5W Revisited: Charting Ceramic Changes*, in « Nekhen News » 24 (2012), pp. 13-14; K. NAGAYA, *Square 10N5W: Innovations in Lithic Production*, in « Nekhen News » 24 (2012), pp. 14-15.

architecture. The stratigraphic analysis of the site, as far as one can tell from the reports, points to intensive ransacking through later buildings. Careless digging complicates the situation. Green often fails to consider these questions in his notebooks; Quibell does not seem to have even been interested in them. In contrast to funerary archaeology, where burials can more easily (but often also do not) provide a meaningful reference point for interpretation and comparison, *i.e.* the deceased individuals, the resolution of find context for Hierakonpolis is lower and will in many cases be restricted to a two-dimensional definition of broader areas at the site. Distribution patterns will only emerge from larger amounts of objects with known find context. This is where the database plays a pivotal role.

Re-excavation

The database artificially re-contextualises objects whose association, distribution and location in the landscape are more evident when excavating them in the field. Given the salinization of the site due to raising ground water table and the erosion of (the few) above-ground structures, re-excavation of the temple and town area would contribute to the aims of the database and would be desirable. Hierakonpolis is also one of the few early Pharaonic towns preserved to a reasonable degree. Surface survey, sieving of excavation dumps, and remote sensing techniques applied to adjacent areas of the site could be viable and promising steps forward. Urgent and desirable as it is, excavation does not, however, remove the need for archival and object research. Structures documented by Quibell and Green in 1897-99 were already gone when Fairservis re-excavated parts of the temple area in the 1970s, and it is unlikely that fieldwork would be able to re-identify structures and archaeological contexts of previous excavations. Moreover, the objects of the old excavations form an important existing body of knowledge and should not be relinquished due to fragile context information. A site-museum with objects from old or fresh excavations such as in the archaeological park on Elephantine island is an unlikely

option for Hierakonpolis because the temple and town area is difficult to access, and probably little appealing to, the touristic mainstream.[15]

Cross-institutional cooperation

As the database is site specific it faces the problems of cross-institutional distribution of objects, knowledge, and publication rights. Collaboration and the use of existing online resources will be instrumental to diminish these obstacles. Research Space, in particular, developed by the British Museum in cooperation with the Andrew Mellon Foundation may provide a useful collaborative, digital umbrella for the Hierakonpolis database.

Public engagement

Beyond the academic questions, the database could be developed into a tool to engage with a wider public. Many objects from Hierakonpolis are prominently displayed in museum galleries, such as in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, the Ashmolean Museum, or the Fitzwilliam Museum. Embedded in an accessible explanatory framework, the database could serve to give visitors an insight into research on objects. An outwardly oriented user surface of the database could raise public excitement for research and an awareness of problematic issues of re-contextualisation, conservation, and the ethics of archaeological practice. Interactive computer panels may distort the visitor flow through galleries while additional text panels might be tiring and little engaging. They may contain questions the answer to which affords a closer look at the object on display or lead to related objects in a thematic tour. A translation of apps into Arabic would help outweigh the Anglocentric background of the database. On the negative side, apps may direct visitor attention to the digital world rather than real objects and are geared towards an audience accostumed to this technology. A less problematic engagement with a wider audience than in museum galleries
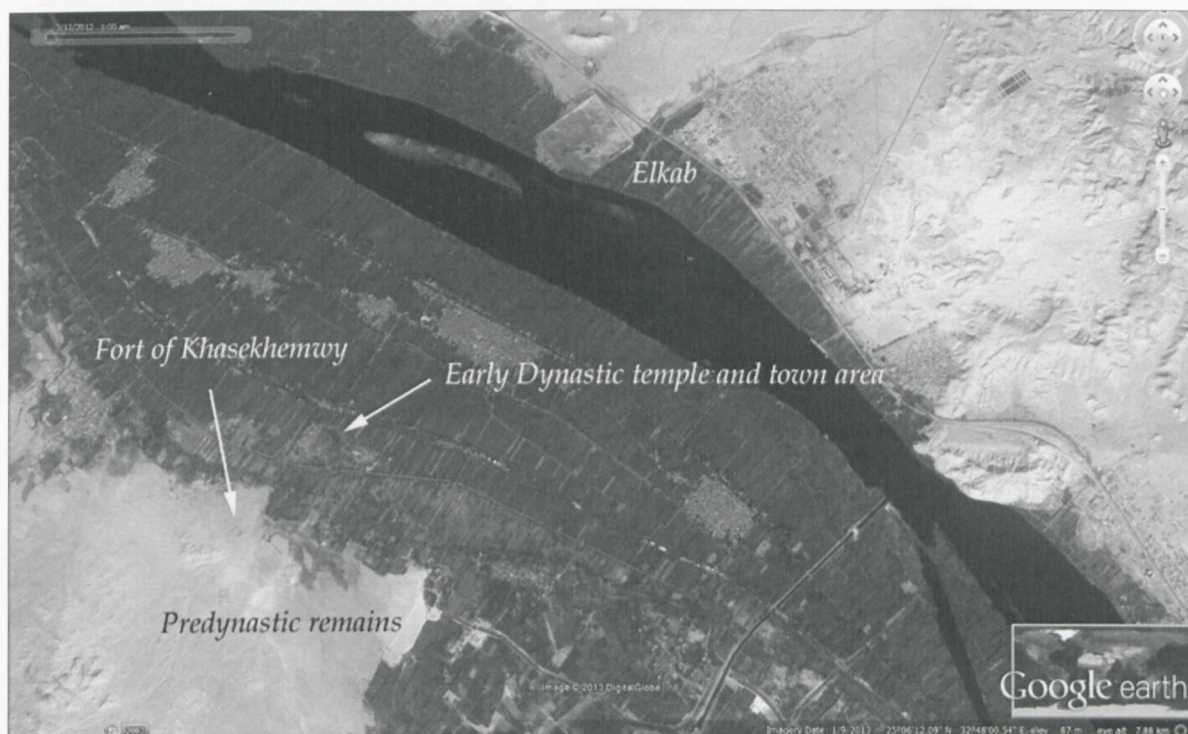
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15. For Elephantine, cf. [W. KAISER], *Elephantine. Die antike Stadt. Offizielles Führungsheft des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Kairo*, Kairo 1998.

would be an extended website presenting Hierakonpolis in a broader narrative of why early civilizations might matter to the modern world.

Summary

Many of the thoughts discussed above will sound familiar to those conducting database based research. They are put forward in writing here in the spirit of the conference which was intended as a forum for discussion of Egypt's material heritage, rather than as a review of results from completed research projects. In this sense, an online database of objects from Hierakonpolis would hopefully be a tool for fresh research on Pharaonic "state formation". It can stimulate new research of unpublished excavated material as much as of the site itself, be it fresh fieldwork, conservation, or analysis of the wider site formation process. This complex bundle of issues should offer an opportunity to present to museum visitors and online readers individual objects on display as an exciting, engaging and basically open invitation to explore more, rather than as a repository of academic knowledge. Open questions concern the integration of the database with existing digital resources, its viability and sustainability. There is no definite answer to these questions. However, keeping research on Hierakonpolis alive and embedding the database in a network of scholars, institutions, and the public, both in Egypt and across the globe, might be a successful way forward.

r.bussmann@ucl.ac.uk

1. Aerial view on locations of major ancient remains at Hierakonpolis and Elkab. Google Earth.

2. The Early Dynastic temple and town area in 2006. Photo: R. Bussmann.