

Ashley Fallon

Clinger award essay

Archaeological excavation at the Temple of Mut, June 2014

Time spent in the field is invaluable for an archaeology student. Classrooms teach history and technique, but such knowledge can only be applied at a dig site. It is particularly helpful for a student to dig at a site in their region of interest, to better understand the modern day culture and working conditions. As a student majoring in archaeology and Near Eastern studies with a concentration in ancient Egypt, it was very important that I learn what life is like at a dig site in Egypt. I was delighted to be given the opportunity to join Dr. Betsy Bryan and her team from Johns Hopkins as they continued their excavation of the Mut temple complex in Luxor. While there I learned about the procedures of a dig site, and expanded my knowledge of both ancient and modern Egypt.

The Mut temple complex is located in middle Egypt in Luxor, which was once the ancient capitol, Thebes. Mut was an Egyptian goddess part of a divine triad including her husband Amun and son Khonsu. The rise of the cult of Amun in the New Kingdom (1550-1069 BCE) meant that Mut too gained prevalence in the Egyptian religion at that time. It was an era of expansion and power for Egypt, as exemplified by the grandeur and size of the temples. Mut's temple was connected to Amun's at Karnak creating the largest temple complex in the world. The two temples were connected via ram-headed sphinx alley, which the sacred statue of Amun travelled on when visiting Mut for festivals and rituals. The presence of Amun's temple made ancient Thebes the center of the cult of Amun and therefore the

ideal place for temple and tomb building. Aside from Karnak, Luxor contains temples at Dier el-Bahri, Dier el-Medina, the Valley of the Kings, and the Valley of the Queens, all built during the New Kingdom.¹

The temple was recently prepared for tourists with the installation of paths and signs throughout the precinct. According to these new signs (which were made in collaboration by USAID, ARCE, MSA, and the Brooklyn Museum), the earliest reference to the goddess Mut comes from the 17th dynasty. She was both a solar and leonine deity, in charge of regulating the world and potentially destroying it. Such powers gave her two forms, that of divine mother and protector, but also the lion-headed goddess Sekhmet who could destroy Egypt and its enemies if angered. Fazzini and Peck explain that this tremendous power also associated the goddess with the pharaoh because she “embodied, bore, directed, and protected the kingship.” This is why in her human form, Mut is depicted with the double crown representing kingship.² Different kings often chose which aspects of Mut’s identity they wanted to associate themselves with, often blending her with other goddesses other than just Sekhmet such as Isis, Hathor, and Bastet.³

The temple of Mut in Luxor is the only temple in Egypt solely dedicated to the goddess.⁴ It was likely built by the female pharaoh Hatshepsut (1472-1457 BCE);

¹ “Hopkins in Egypt Today: Additional Information.” Last modified 2012.

<http://pages.jh.edu/~egypttoday/egypttoday2.html>.

² Richard Fazzini and William H. Peck, “Excavating the Temple of Mut,” *Archaeology* 36, no. 2 (March/April 1983): 16, accessed August 13, 2014.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41728657>.

³ Jennifer Pinkowski, “Egypt’s Ageless Goddess,” *Archaeology* 59, no. 5 (September 2006): 45, accessed August 13, 2014.

⁴ *Ibid*, 45.

her cartouche and images have been found in the oldest part of the temple.⁵ The most common name in the temple though is that of Amenhotep III (1388-1348 BCE), which is carved on the hundreds of life-size statues of Sekhmet that line the temple walls.⁶ The signs on the site give a beautifully detailed explanation of the growth of the temple over time. The temple was built next to a crescent-shaped lake called the Isheru. Such lakes were often associated with lion goddess because they could contain the goddesses' powers of destruction while also giving them a safe place to give birth. The temple's location within the crescent creates an image of land rising out of the primordial waters of Nun, part of the ancient Egyptian myth of creation. Over time, pharaohs added to the original temple, including new inscriptions, pillars, and gates, as well as a mammisi (birth house) for Mut's son Khonsu, and adjoining smaller temples. Fazzini and Peck explain that in the case of Taharqa, who ruled in the 25th Dynasty, his additions depicted his divine birth as a form of propaganda to solidify his rule.⁷ The signs on site state that the precinct was in use at least until the rule of Roman emperor Tiberius (14-37 CE).

Large-scale excavation of Mut temple began in the 1890s under Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay who were the first women to excavate anywhere in Egypt.⁸ They were not, however, the first to uncover parts of the temple from the desert sands. Fazzini and Peck mention an Arab sheikh who supposedly excavated and sold some of the site's hundreds, and possibly once closer to one thousand,

⁵ Pinkowski, "Egypt's Ageless Goddess," 47.

⁶ Ibid, 46.

⁷ Fazzini and Peck, "Excavating the Temple of Mut," 21.

⁸ Pinkowski, "Egypt's Ageless Goddess," 46.

Sekhmet statues.⁹ In 1977 the Brooklyn Museum began excavating the temple under Richard Fazzini, and they continue to excavate in the North of the precinct.¹⁰ The Johns Hopkins University team has been working at the precinct under Betsy Bryan for the past twelve years.¹¹ With the help of the American Research Center in Egypt, the second court of the temple, as well as interior walls and decorated blocks, were rebuilt and conserved. Many of the decorated blocks were conserved and put on display in an open air museum within the temple. The Johns Hopkins team hopes to eventually rebuild the temple to its state in the New Kingdom, circa 1470 BCE.¹²

The Johns Hopkins team has been excavating behind the sacred lake on the opposite bank of the temple. Granaries and bakeries from the 18th dynasty were found in this area, as well as proof that these production areas were used in the Third Intermediate Period and Saite Era.¹³ The 2012 excavation season uncovered up to sixteen human burials, some of which were removed in February and March of 2014. One of the goals during the June 2014 excavation was to remove another skeleton. However, due to the mass amounts of information collected, the skeleton was the only thing excavated in June and the rest of the time was used as a study season. The hope was that the already collected information could be organized and prepared for publication.¹⁴ This meant that the season was not necessarily a typical one, but I learned much about the processes necessary to prepare for publication.

⁹ Fazzini and Peck, "Excavating the Temple of Mut," 18.

¹⁰ "Hopkins in Egypt Today: Additional Information."

¹¹ "Hopkins in Egypt Today: May-June 2014."

¹² "Hopkins in Egypt Today: Additional Information."

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Hopkins in Egypt Today: May-June 2014."

The day would start with a 4:30 am alarm, which was often accompanied by the braying of donkeys and cries of chickens, and was always followed by the morning call to prayer that echoed through the streets from the nearby mosque. After breakfast at the hotel, the commute to Mut temple included a boat ride across the Nile River and a van ride to the temple itself. Work began at six when Dr. Bryan arrived.

The thirteen-person team of graduate and undergraduate students would break up into smaller groups of teams dedicated to small finds, GIS, skeleton excavation, and pottery. The team focusing on small finds worked to identify, catalogue, and photograph small artifacts such as amulets, small statuettes, fragments of flint, and any non-pottery ceramics for the database. Some of these objects were then given to the illustrators to be drawn. The GIS team collected survey data on the topography of the site to be added to the American Research Center in Egypt's geographic information systems (GIS). A total station was used to collect this data.

One team worked to remove one of the sixteen skeletons found in the 2012 excavation. Since only Egyptians are allowed to excavate in Egypt, two trained workmen called Guftis assisted in the excavation. The team worked to understand the position of the skeleton and its relation to the surrounding walls and then carefully removed all the bones to be studied in the nearby Karnak conservation lab. The GIS team also recorded the exact location of the skeleton to be added to the site's survey data.

I was part of the team examining pottery. In the shade of the palm trees referred to as “the oasis” we sat on mats surrounded by bags of pottery sherds, clipboards, clippers, glue, and books and photos used for comparisons. The sherds, or broken pieces of pottery, had already been sorted so that only diagnostic ones remained. Diagnostic sherds included rims, bases, and decorated pieces of pottery. These provide information about form, which is the most useful and reliable quality used to date pottery. Form refers to the shape of the vessel; different forms were present during different time periods and are therefore more reliable for dating than other aspects of the sherds.

Every bag was full of sherds from a specific layer, or strata, from a trench. This information was recorded on a worksheet and then each sherd was numbered with a sharpie. The information recorded about each sherd included fabric, exterior surface, part of vessel, possible date, and comperanda. Fabric refers to the clay that was used to make the vessel. In ancient Egypt, two types of clays were used, Nile silt collected from the Nile River, and Marl collected from the desert wadis. Fabric could then be subcategorized based on the size of particles and type of inclusions. Clippers were used to make a fresh cut on the sherds to better see the fabric. I was very nervous using the clippers in the beginning because I had only ever handled pottery in the Johns Hopkins archaeological museum while wearing gloves. It was new for me to touch the sherds with my bare hands, let alone cut them. A clean cut was necessary though to better see the fabric and have more accurate information, so I adjusted.

The exterior was also noted on the worksheet. It could have been smoothed, incised, slipped, polished, or washed. If a vessel was smoothed then the ancient potter simply used his or her hands or a tool to even out the surface. Sometimes fingerprints and finger swipes left by the ancient potter could be seen from this process. Decorative designs could then be incised using a tool. Alternatively, slip could be applied. Slip is watered down clay that is applied to the outside of a vessel for practical and aesthetic reasons. It can act as a paint to change the color of the pot, but was usually used to decrease the vessel's porosity so it retained liquids better. The exterior of pottery could also be polished to a shine by rubbing the surface with a stone or cloth after it had been fired in a kiln. After firing, paint or dye could be applied to the surface of the vessel. Analyzing the exterior surface helped determine what the vessel may have been used for, and could even help with dating.

The worksheet also included information about the part of the vessel the sherd was from, which could be the rim, base, or wall/body of the vessel. This information could be used to estimate how many complete vessels there were and better understand what the complete vessel may have looked like. The surrounding books and photographs helped in this endeavor by providing comparable forms. If a match was found then it could be used to date the sherd.

The worksheet also included a notes section where extra observations could be recorded, such as blackened smudges created from fire, or white saltation created from water. These notes provided information about the site itself. If most of the sherds from one strata were covered in white saltation, chances are that layer was exposed to water. This saltation could be seen on the sherds that had been dug

up from the surrounding lake area, giving an idea of the level of the lake during different time periods. Similarly, if a lot of blackened and soot smeared pottery was found it could be inferred that a fire took place. The date and size of the fire could be determined based on the form of the sherds and the amount burned.

Soot-covered pottery could sometimes be confused with poorly fired pottery. If a vessel was left in a kiln too long, or if the kiln was too hot, or if the vessels were not stacked properly in the kiln, they could come out partially or entirely black. It was sometimes difficult to make the distinction between burned and poorly fired pottery, but it was important not to confuse the two because a fire within the temple and a clumsy pottery firer are two very different things. One could look at where the blackened areas are, for example if the broken sherd's interior is blackened but not the exterior, it was probably in a fire after it had broken and the inside was exposed to the flames and smoke. If a pot was fired wrong, the exterior would blacken first because it is exposed to the heat of the kiln. Sometimes the small horizontal lines created from making a vessel on a potter's wheel, called rills, were visible and helped determine the manufacturing methods and date.

The temple was full of people besides the small, specialized groups of students. Dr. Bryan photographed pottery and small finds for the database, and took an occasional candid picture of the team for the website. A conservator removed a large storage jar from the mud brick wall it had been built into. He then repaired and cleaned the pot, which was largely in tact. After caring for the pot he cleaned some of the blocks in the open-air museum. The other workers, under the direction

of a knowledgeable Gufti, refilled some of the squares to preserve the mudbrick walls without damaging them.

One of the reasons I wanted to go on a dig somewhere in Egypt specifically is because my focus within my archaeology and Near Eastern studies majors is Egyptology, and I wanted to better understand the conditions of digging in Egypt. Many worry about the heat, and rightly so. An average day in June was around 105 degrees Fahrenheit, though some days reached 120. There is no such thing as being outside without sweating, and water is a very important necessity to keep on you at all times. A good hat actually kept you cooler and long sleeves protect from sunburn. The heat was surprisingly manageable once you learned to sip water constantly and never leave without a hat.

Despite the temple's recent tourist renovations, the wild dogs that usually roamed throughout the streets found refuge amongst the ram-headed sphinxes within the temple walls and cooled off in the Isheru. Sometimes these bands of dogs had to be scared off if they came too close for comfort. Scorpions were another concern and occasionally joined the pottery team on the mats where they were quickly and carefully killed. They were not frequent enough for constant worry, but anyone sitting on the ground usually tucked the back of their shirt into their pants just in case. Snakes also hid in dark spaces, like under the pottery bags, as well as large spiders.

The biggest obstacle though was not the heat or animals, but the wind. In the late morning a fierce wind would often pick up and cause a lot of issues for the pottery team. Every worksheet and photograph had to be secured under something

heavy, as well as the location tags. Every bag of pottery had a handwritten, paper tag that included the exact location the pottery came from along with the date it was excavated. Without those tags the pottery would become useless because it had no context. Despite our most careful efforts, a few tags were lost on particularly blustery days.

The workday would end at noon when the heat of the day started to become unbearable. Everything would be packed up fully and the team would retreat back to the hotel for lunch. After lunch was pottery drawing, which is a very careful and tedious art in which the shape and scale of the pottery sherds is drawn using specific tools. These drawings were double-checked by the illustrators and will be used for publication.

Every Friday was a free day, which was used for sightseeing. I could read as much about a temple as I wanted, but nothing gave me more knowledge and understanding than actually exploring one. The trips included stops at the New Kingdom tombs at Elkab, and the First Intermediate Period tombs at Moalla. We visited the temples at Dendera, Abydos, Edfu, Philae, Kom Ombo, and Abu Simbel. Right in Luxor we saw Luxor temple, Hatshepsut's mortuary temple, the tombs at Sheikh Abd-el Qurna, the tombs in the Valley of the Kings, the workers' town at Deir-el Medina, and of course Karnak temple.

Working as part of the Johns Hopkins team at the temple of Mut was an incredibly fulfilling experience in which I not only learned what it is like to work at an archaeological dig in Egypt, but I also realized that I am absolutely pursuing something I love. I plan to continue my education in graduate school and possibly

specialize in ceramics, an interest newly awakened on site while digging through the many pottery bags. It is my hope to someday work in Egypt as more than just a student.

Reference list

Fazznini, Richard A, and William H. Peck. "Excavating the Temple of Mut."

Archaeology 36, no. 2 (March/April 1983): 16-23. Accessed August 13, 2014.

Johns Hopkins University. "Hopkins in Egypt Today: Additional Information." Last modified 2012. <http://pages.jh.edu/~egypttoday/egypttoday2.html>.

Johns Hopkins University. "Hopkins in Egypt Today: May-June 2014," last modified 2014. <http://pages.jh.edu/~egypttoday/>.

Pinkowski, Jennifer. "Egypt's Ageless Goddess." *Archaeology* 59, no. 5 (September 2006): 44-49. Accessed August 13, 2014. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41728657>.

