Mut al-Kharab – Field Season 2013

Report submitted to the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Egypt

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The excavations at Mut el-Kharab in 2013 lasted for just one week due to the late arrival of military clearance for work at the site. The work was sponsored and funded by Monash University. For the great assistance rendered to the excavations at every level I wish to thank Maher Bashendi, Director of the Dakhleh-Farafra Antiquities Inspectorate, and all of his staff, especially Yasser Farouk the inspector seconded to the excavations, and Ahmed Gumaa who enabled the study of inscribed material stored in the SCA magazine at Ismant.

The work comprised two parts: the study of the abnormal hieratic and demotic ostraka from previous excavations at Mut el-Kharab by Dr Gunter Vittmann (Wurzburg University), and new excavations at the site. This report will summarize the results of the new excavations.

The principal aim of the fieldwork was to clarify and extend the work conducted during the last season at the site in 2011; it thus focused upon areas adjacent to Trench 38 and the mud-brick tower (Trench 40), and within Trench 41 (see accompanying plan). Trench 38 revealed the existence of what might be magazines on the western side of the Temple of Seth with many ostraka in abnormal hieratic possibly of the 8th century BCE; several of these are large and one appears to be the largest ostrakon in abnormal hieratic yet discovered. In the lowest contexts within this trench early Old Kingdom material was discovered. Trench 41 indicated that the double stone walls of the temple continued farther north than previous attested and reused blocks there contained one of the time of Ramesses XI. The brick tower on the immediate east of the remains of the temple is assumed to be of the Roman Period sand attest probable fortification of the site at that time.

I: Excavation within the Temple of Seth

Trench 41 is to the east of Trenches 21 and 18 and north of Trenches 4, 32 and 39. Excavation undertaken in 2011 revealed the extension of the temples walls into this part of the site from Trenches 4, 32 and 39, and also paving comprising reused blocks like that in Trenches 18 and 21. Work was restricted to the west edge of the trench, along the wall of the building in Trench 18 and terminating in the north against an W/E red brick wall that projects from this building. Several pits had been cut into the trench, presumably to extract stones. The excavations revealed two layers of paving stones and associated features.

The lower level of paving is set directly upon an L-shaped channel-like feature in mud brick oriented north-south aligned with the base of the wall of Trench 18; it is two courses high and was gypsum plastered on its outer face. This feature commenced just north of the south end
of the wall of Trench 18 and continued north for four metres when it extends to the east; its purpose is unknown. The blocks overlying this feature were all reused from other buildings and included one decorated block with the lower legs of a male figure facing right and part of a hieroglyphic text mentioning Seth, Great of Strength. Another fragment had part of a hieroglyphic text and one other a single glyph – an m. At some point the lower paving and the channel-like feature were covered by bricks and a yellow wall was constructed to the east, and later still red-brick wall was laid on top of this yellow wall. An upper layer of paved stones was eventually laid between the yellow wall in the east and the east wall of Trench 18. These upper pavers correspond with those in the south just east of the entrance to Trench 21. Removal of fill in the south revealed that the wall of Trench 18 is built upon sand. We did some minimal clearance in the area east of the yellow wall and found only sand. The sand had potsherds that date to the Terminal Sheikh Muftah period.

II: Area to west of Temple

Trench 42: excavated by Sarah Ricketts

Trench 42 is located immediately adjacent of Trench 38 excavated in 2011, and appeared to be bounded by walls on all sides at topsoil level. The extent of the trench was dictated by these walls. It measured 2.7m on the south and 2.4m on the north by 4.5m on the west and 4.6m on the east. The walls on the north, west and east are all contemporaneous and related, being constructed of a mixture of grey and yellow mud bricks with course red mortar. The south wall was not excavated beneath topsoil level. Mud-brick rubble appeared concentrated in the centre of the trench at surface level, extending from the west wall, but after excavation it was revealed to spread across the entire trench. This rubble was filled with miscellaneous bricks, stones, animal bones, ceramic sherds and inscribed ostraka.

On day 2 of excavation it was decided to half the size of the trench due to time constraints and the new area of excavation was concentrated in an area 2 x 2m in the northern half of the trench. Below the mud-brick rubble, an alignment of bricks was recorded running roughly east-west. This wall was truncated by a large stone on the east, which appears unrelated to the wall in the southern part of the area. The division of the area caused by this wall segregated two types of fill, a compacted layer to the south and soft, dusty sand to the north. This soft fill contained ostraka, ceramics and occasional brick. Beneath this fill, consecutive layers of fill, alternating between very soft and dusty, and slightly more compacted, continued for some depth below the mud-rick walls. Concentrated in the north-east corner, a highly compacted layer rich in gypsum was discovered, and contained a substantial quantity of mica. Immediately beneath this gypsum layer, two more related brick alignments appeared, running east-west and north-south. These were only one brick deep, laid vertically, in the north-south alignment and two bricks deep, laid horizontally, in the east-west alignment. A compacted earth floor was discovered in the main area. One small corner of this floor extended beneath the bricks, and appeared to have continued in an easterly direction, but has suffered much erosion. The floor was discovered within the fill layers, and two oily deposits were located on this floor, indicating activity here. There was also ash deposits both on top of and mixed within the floor level. Below the floor, the soft and compact fill alternation continued. Ceramics and artefactual material were more common within the soft fill layers. The floor curves up on the south as though it originally abutted a now-missing feature.
Beneath the surface level walls, more alignments of bricks were discovered in the western and northern edges of the trench, built below the fill the top walls were constructed upon, indicating that walls were built on top of walls. At the finish of excavation, soft fill yielding artefacts was being excavated, but due to time constraints its excavation was not completed. One of the most significant types of find from the trench is mud seals, many fragments with small hieroglyphic inscriptions. They await detail study but preliminary observation identified references to priests, the gods Amun and Khonsu, and the name Padiamun; they appear to have been attached to objects and applied over strings, and this might confirm the identity of the structures here as magazines.

**Trench 43: excavated by Caleb Hamilton**

Trench 43 is located one metre south of Trench 38A, adjacent and east of the wall here, which it abuts. The trench originally measured 2m north to south and 3m west to east; however, it was extended eventually one metre to the east. The topsoil, east of the wall on the western edge of the trench consisted of a loose sand layer which gave way to collapsed mud brick mixed with pottery from multiple time periods. The wall at the western edge of the trench extends four courses below topsoil. The bricks for this wall are laid horizontally and vertically below the surface and are brown mud brick. Underneath this wall, evident through excavation, is a compact fill that may have served as the foundations of the base of this wall. As the mud-brick collapse was cleared a wall emerged running the entire length of the northern edge of the trench. The base of this northern wall was not reached due to the short time period available; it extends under the western wall. Some of the bricks of this wall have a yellow colour.

This was one of three possible walls found in the trench. In the south-western corner, beneath the mud-brick collapse and loose soil, a small, pit was found. This pit was shallow and contained sand only, which was different to the fill for the rest of the trench. The pit and mud-brick collapse were cleared to reveal more of the northern wall, showing that it contains bricks that are laid both horizontally and vertically. The mud-brick collapse was cleared to expose a wall running north to south in the middle of the trench. This wall is three courses high; it overlies fill. The bricks of this wall have a similar yellow colour to the wall on the north. Butting this wall, in the middle of the trench, also under mud-brick collapse and soil is another possible wall on the east, though it was not fully excavated and the trench extension was needed to find its width, though only the top of the wall is exposed currently. A small area, butting the northern and central walls of the trench was excavated; it contained compacted sand and a small amount of localised ash suggesting a hearth in this area. Ceramics and artefactual material are mixed in all levels, making it hard to give fixed time periods without further excavation.

**Trench 44: excavated by Paul Kucera and Dominic Perry**

Trench 44 was positioned on the outer northwest corner of the structure identified in 2011 as a tower. The trench formed an L-shape with dimensions of 6 x 6 m maximum, measuring 3 m out from the tower’s north and west walls. The aim of this trench was to better clarify the external walls of the structure and also its dimension; it was also hoped to gain further insight into its construction date and possible phasing. During the excavation an east-west oriented sandstone wall, measuring approximately 65 cm wide, was discovered 2 m in from the north
trench baulk. It is aligned with the north face of the tower and butts the northwest corner of the structure. This wall was built with re-used sandstone of an extremely friable/fragile state-of-preservation, one block of which was found to be the mid-section of a sculpted figure. The piece comprised the upper leg and thigh to the knee of a slightly larger-than-life human figure with traces of the kilt surviving. The sandstone was in poor condition due to moisture saturation and no other features survived. The limitations of a short excavation season precluded any attempt to further explore this sandstone wall, although it is suspected that only one course remains in situ. Above this feature debris (sandstone, mud brick, accumulated and compacted sand) was revealed up to the present surface-level, with salt-hardened collapse in and around the north-west corner of the tower and the sandstone wall.

During the night of the 2nd of February, the trench was disturbed by robbers who dug a pit approximately 1.5m deep into its base; excavation terminated on the 3rd of February. Based on the information obtained from the trench, taking into consideration the material exposed in the robbers’ pit, there is a probable occupation layer below a yellow mud-brick platform, followed by the construction of the tower above the platform, although the true nature of the tower’s foundations requires further investigation. The tower, on present knowledge, appears to have preceded the construction of the sandstone wall; the platform is attested on the southern side of the tower also. Ceramic material observed in the excavated deposits all indicate a late date for the activity in this area of the site of the Late Roman to Islamic Periods.
Plan of the central part of Mut al-Kharab showing the location of the excavated trenches to 2013.
Trench 41: stone pavings, looking south.

Trench 44: stone wall with statue fragment near metre scale, looking north-east.
Trench 42: mud floor on left (west) and brick-lined recess on right; looking north.

Trench 43: the complex of walls filling the trench, looking west.