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ORIENTALIA LOVANIENSIA

ANALECTA

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ÉGYPTE ANTÉRIEURE

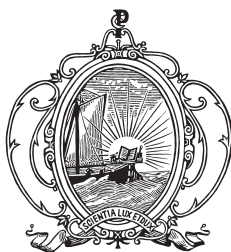
Mélanges de préhistoire et d'archéologie offerts
à Béatrix Midant-Reynes par ses étudiants,
collègues et amis

édités par

NATHALIE BUCHEZ et YANN TRISTANT

avec la collaboration de

OLIVIER ROCHECOUSTE



PEETERS

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THE LOST TELL OF ELKAB

WOUTER CLAES

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It is with great pleasure that we dedicate this modest contribution to Béatrix Midant-Reynes as a token of respect and admiration for her contributions to our knowledge of the archaeology of early Egypt.

Depuis 2009, la Mission archéologique belge à Elkab des Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire fouille les vestiges d'une large zone d'habitat qui puise ses origines dans l'époque badarienne. Cet habitat est situé à l'intérieur de l'enceinte de la Basse Époque, à l'ouest des temples, dans une zone bordée au nord par le double mur de la fin de l'Ancien Empire. Les descriptions et les dessins des premiers voyageurs indiquent qu'un grand tell existait jadis dans cette région. Comme sur de nombreux autres sites égyptiens, l'exploitation intensive du seabkh a presque complètement détruit ce tell au cours du XIX^e siècle. En conséquence, les archéologues travaillant à Elkab ont toujours supposé qu'il ne restait pratiquement plus rien de la zone domestique la plus ancienne du site. Toutefois, il est possible de reconstituer l'emplacement et l'ampleur du tell en analysant ces documents du XIX^e siècle. Dans cet article, nous présentons un aperçu des sources disponibles concernant l'emplacement du « tell perdu » d'Elkab, qui se sont révélées d'une grande utilité pour notre travail actuel sur l'habitat d'Elkab.

Since 2009, the Belgian Archaeological Mission to Elkab of the Royal Museums of Art and History is excavating the remains of a large settlement that has its origin in the Badarian period. This settlement is located within the Late Period Great Walls, immediately west of the temples, in an area which is bordered to the north by the late Old Kingdom Double Walls. Descriptions and drawings by early travellers indicate that a large tell once existed in this area. Like at many other sites in Egypt, intensive seabkh digging almost completely destroyed this tell in the course of the 19th century. As a consequence, archaeologists working at Elkab have always supposed that virtually nothing was left of the original habitation of the site. However, the location and extent of this tell can be reconstructed by analysing these primarily 19th century documents. In this contribution, we present an overview of the available sources with regard to the location of the “lost tell” of Elkab that proved to be of great importance for our current work in the Elkab settlement.

Introduction

At the onset of the 19th century, the entire Egyptian population amounted to approximately 4 million inhabitants. This is considerably less than during Roman times but even towards the end of the 19th century, southern Upper Egypt still remained rather sparsely populated (McCarthy 1976). Population pressure on the then existing landscape was low, resulting in favourable conditions for the preservation of archaeological sites, but the dramatic population increase instigated by the agricultural reforms that were stimulated by Muhammed Ali during the first half of the 19th century posed a serious threat to archaeological sites. In particular, settlement sites became the victim of the digging for agricultural fertilizer or *sebakh* and its devastating effects have resulted in the destruction or even the complete loss of many sites throughout the entire Egyptian Nile Valley (Bailey 1999; Moeller 2016: 53-54). For instance, this was the case at the Upper Egyptian site of Elkab. Already in 1893 when Somers Clarke (1921: 56-60) first visited the site, he noticed that, as a consequence of *sebakh* digging, huge quantities of potsherds from various periods and other town debris covered the surface of the large open area immediately west of the temple zone and south of the late Old Kingdom Double Walls. He believed this area was the location of the (early) pharaonic town of Elkab. Based on oral accounts from the local population, Clarke adds that at the beginning of the 19th century this area was still occupied by the ruins of houses, forming a mound as high as and even covering part of the Late Period enclosure wall (or so-called Great Walls), which was preserved to a height of about 11 m, but that by the mid-19th century, the *sebakhin* had already dug away large parts of this mound. From Clarke's description, it is clear that this area was seriously ravaged in the past. Given its current appearance as a vast plain that is disturbed by innumerable small depressions as a result of *sebakh* digging, it is no surprise that this part of the site never aroused much interest from the archaeologists working at Elkab.

However, vital information for the location and extent of this habitation mound can be found in the accounts, sketches and drawings of earlier visitors, prior to the start of the proper archaeological investigation of the site at the end of the 19th century. These documents unmistakably prove that there was a large tell at Elkab situated in the area to the west of the temples.

The settlement of Elkab through the eyes of early travellers¹

Elkab has been visited on many occasions by travellers, artists and scholars. The earliest reference to Elkab can be found in the notes of the French priest

¹ Some of this material has already been published (see Hendrickx et al. 2010) but this publication deals specifically with the history, date and function of the different enclosure walls of Elkab and touches the subject of the location of the settlement only indirectly.

Claude Sicard (1677–†1726) (Martin 1982a: V-XXV; Bierbrier 2019: 431). After being sent to Syria as a missionary in 1700, he was appointed head of the Jesuit mission in Cairo in 1712 where he remained the rest of his life. Between 1714 and 1726, Sicard travelled Egypt extensively and he is the first European known to have penetrated the south of Egypt as far as Philae. Although the principal objective of his travels was to convert the Copts, he spent more and more time describing and documenting Egypt's ancient monuments with the aim of publishing a general account on both ancient and modern Egypt. However, his untimely death in 1726 decided otherwise and the majority of his papers are now lost. His surviving notes, including a complete list of the monuments and sites he visited, were published in 1982 by Maurice Martin and Serge Sauneron (Martin 1982a, 1982b; Sauneron & Martin 1982). He also produced a general map of Egypt in 1722 (Martin 1982a: VIII, XIV; Sauneron & Martin 1982) that shows the location of Elkab for the first time.² From his surviving notes and list of monuments and sites we know that Sicard visited Elkab in December 1720. Moreover, he also drew a plan of the “*the temple of Lucina*” (Martin 1982a: 88, 1982b: 148; Sauneron & Martin 1982: 182, nr. 19) but unfortunately, this plan is lost and no more additional information on Elkab is to be found in Sicard's papers.

About 20 years later, Elkab was visited by Charles Perry (ca. 1698–†1780) (Bierbrier 2019: 361), a British physician who made an extensive voyage through the Ottoman Empire between 1739 and 1742. His travels also brought him to Egypt and in December 1741, he journeyed up the Nile to Aswan. The account of his voyage was published in 1743 (Perry 1743) and provides the first real description of the site of Elkab. At page 361 of his *Voyage to the Levant*, Perry mentions a visit to a place called “*Caab*”, situated about 130 km (“*27 leagues*”) north of Aswan. He describes the temples, “*consisting of Six Pillars in Two Rows, with their Roofs intire*” but also “*a high Mountain, with a Castle at Top of it*”. In our opinion, this “*high mountain*” refers to the ancient tell of Elkab which must have been still more or less intact at the time of Perry's visit to the site. A drawing by Nestor L'Hôte from 1838, which shows a hill with constructions on top of it that rises above the Great Walls, corroborates this description (see *infra*, Fig. 7). According to Clarke, this “*high mountain*” refers to the rock necropolis and a mud brick construction on top of it which he interpreted as a watch post or outlook (Clarke 1921: 61; 1922: 20). This watch post is in fact a 3rd Dynasty mastaba (see Limme et al. 1997; Limme 2000; Huyge 2003) that in its present state of preservation is hardly visible from the Nile. Although it is situated on top of the rock necropolis which emerges almost 50 m above the floodplain and which is higher than the known height of the tell (ca. 30 m., see *infra*, p. 194, 205), it seems unlikely that Perry referred to this monument.

² Elkab is mentioned in the map under its Latin name, *Lucinae civitas*.

Accounts by later travellers that describe the presence of a large hill covered with the ruins of houses, seem in our view more eligible to correspond to Perry's description. Whether or not this is indeed a reference to the tell, Perry's attention is mainly drawn towards the temples and he gives no further information on the presence or location of the Elkab tell.

From then onwards, a large number of travellers visited Elkab. In many cases, Elkab was only briefly mentioned in their travel accounts with no explicit reference or just a few sentences that specifically relate to the tell or habitation at Elkab. However, some descriptions, and especially a number of maps and drawings, do provide relevant information that proved to be useful for determining the location and extent of the Elkab settlement.

The French Expedition and the Description de l'Égypte (1799-1801)

An early description of Elkab containing a somewhat substantial amount of detail can be found in the famous *Description de l'Égypte*. In chapter 6, Alexandre de Saint-Genis (1821: 341-356), a French engineer and member of the *Commission des Sciences et des Arts*, described the general location of the site, the Great Walls and the temples inside the temple enclosure, the small temple of Thutmosis III, the ancient quarry just north of Elkab and some of the decorated New Kingdom tombs in the rock necropolis. The *Description* also contains the first map of the Great Walls and the area inside, which provides relevant information regarding the location of the Elkab settlement (Fig. 1). The Great Walls are drawn, including the now-missing southern corner, on a scale that corresponds well with its actual dimensions. However, this map shows several inaccuracies, primarily with regard to the location of the temple enclosure which is not pictured in its actual location but right in the centre of the Great Walls. In the bottom left corner of the map, a large elevated area is indicated and explained as consisting of "*ruines de constructions en briques*". This elevated area lies in the western corner and against part of the north-western and south-western course of the Great Walls but does not appear on the other side which may suggest that it only lies against and not over the Great Walls. Much smaller elevated parts containing ruins as well, are also present immediately northwest of the temple enclosure. Saint-Genis interpreted the Great Walls as an enclosure wall surrounding the ancient town of Elkab and the mud brick ruins on the elevated parts as the remains of houses. However, because the area was covered with pottery "*actuellement en usage dans le pays*", the presence of vaults which he believed the ancient Egyptians were not capable of building, and the fact that bricks from the Great Walls were used to build these houses, he believed that they were not of great antiquity and were probably of modern age (Saint-Genis 1821: 345). A modern date is undoubtedly incorrect. Mud brick vaults were used in ancient Egyptian architecture as early as the Early Dynastic Period (Spencer 1979: 123-127; Arnold 2003:



Fig. 1. Map of Elkab (*Description de l'Égypte. Antiquités*, vol. I: pl. 66).

252-254) and, with the possible exception of four fragments of ceramic tiles of Islamic age that were found by Jean-Jacques Rifaud somewhere between 1814 and 1826³, archaeological material later than the Coptic period has never been found at Elkab (Clarke 1921; field observations by the Belgian Archaeological Mission to Elkab).

³ Quertinmont 2014. The Elkab provenance of these tiles can be reasonably questioned. Rifaud's reputation is far from impeccable and his publications are interspersed with errors and mistakes. See e.g. Yoyotte 1998: 222-228; Bruwier 2014; Claes 2014: 40. The French translation of Belzoni's *Narrative* (Belzoni 1821: 108) states that agents of Drovetti were digging at Elkab on November 21, 1818, but this most probably is an error of the translator. Rifaud was indeed Drovetti's principal excavator and this seems to confirm that he had actually been conducting excavations at Elkab. However, the original English edition of 1820 says Drovetti's men were digging in Edfu at the moment Belzoni visited this site, the day after he was at Elkab (Belzoni 1820: 351-352).

Robert Hay (1825? & 1828?)

The British traveller and antiquarian Robert Hay (1799–†1863) (Tillet 1984; Bierbrier 2019: 211), who is most famous for his drawings of Old Cairo that were published in 1840, spent several years in Egypt between 1824-1828 and 1829-1834, travelling the country as far south as Abu Simbel in the company of artists and scholars like Joseph Bonomi, James Burton, Edward William Lane and John Gardner Wilkinson.⁴ He assembled a substantial body of documentation on a large number of monuments, including descriptions, drawings, plans and copies of inscriptions. Because of the enormous financial deficit that he sustained when publishing his *Illustrations of Cairo*, he renounced the publication of the rest of his documentation, which is now kept in the British Library (Add MS 29832).

An important document in Hay's archive is a sketch map of the temple area and the Great Walls (Fig. 2). The exact date of this map is not known but it was most probably made before Lane's visit to the site on May 12th, 1826 (see *infra*, p. 199). Contrary to Lane, who in our opinion explicitly mentions them, the Old Kingdom Double Walls are not shown on this map which could indicate that when Hay was at Elkab, these walls were still covered by the tell and became visible only after the *sebakhin* had dug away enough town debris to expose them. At the time of Hay's visit, this may not yet have been the case, and because of this, we tentatively date it around 1825, or in any case prior to Lane's visit to the site in May 1826.⁵

Like the map in the *Description de l'Égypte*, Hay's map again shows an elevated space immediately outside the western corner of the temple enclosure, this time with a sort of recess or large notch in its southern end. A note from Hay designates this area as "*the remains of towns accumulated one above the other to at least 100 feet [> 30 m]. They [= the sebakhin] are now cutting away the mound to make use of the soil for their fields.*" What is immediately clear from this sketch map is the unequal scale used to draw different elements. The remains of the temple enclosure and temples, which are drawn in a meticulous and accurate way, are presented on a much larger scale than the rest of the map (Hendrickx et al. 2010: 150, n°19). The lack of a uniform scale is obviously problematic for a correct interpretation of the map. Hay, however, gave specific dimensions for certain parts of the Great Walls which partly solves this problem. He also indicated the distance between the eastern gate of the temple enclosure and the north-eastern section of the Great Walls (350 paces). This corresponds

⁴ For a more extensive account of Hay's endeavours in Egypt, see Tillet 1984; Grutz 2003.

⁵ Contra Hendrickx et al. (2010: 149-150, fig. 3) who state that the map was made shortly after 1828, however without any argumentation. From Hay's manuscript diary, kept in the British Library, we know that he travelled up north from Philae in May 1825 while recording monuments at different sites before arriving back in Luxor in October 1825 (Grutz 2003: 4; see also Tillet 1984: iii-iv). Note also that this map was already cited by Clarke (1922: 21).

of the Great Walls. Moreover, we can clearly see on the map that according to Hay, the tell also covers the westernmost end of this part of the enclosure wall. A remarkable difference between both maps, however, is the fact that Hay did not draw the south-western part of the Great Walls. It is not clear whether that part of the enclosure wall was not drawn because it was not visible or whether the wall was present but omitted for unknown reasons. A logical explanation for this contradiction could be that by the time Hay was in Elkab,⁶ the southern corner of the Great Walls already disappeared, resulting in its present state of preservation, while the vast majority of the rest of the south-western course of the Great Walls was still covered by the remains of the tell. Indeed, there are several indications to presume that at one point the tell covered part of the Great Walls (see for instance Clarke 1921: 60). Yet, this does not counter the fact that the Great Walls were shown complete on the map of the *Description de l'Égypte*. Descriptions by earlier travellers also seemingly mention that the Great Walls were still complete at the beginning of the 19th century.⁷ However, as we have seen above, the accuracy of this map can be seriously questioned. Not only are the temples and the temple enclosure incorrectly positioned, this map is moreover the only one that situates the main part of the tell separate from the temple enclosure. Smaller elevations with similar indications for the presence of brick constructions are present near the temple enclosure, but are not in connection to the main part of the tell. Whether or not the south-western part of the Great Walls was entirely visible at the time of the French expedition can therefore not be answered beyond reasonable doubt.⁸ In any case, the map unequivocally indicates the presence of a mound or tell at Elkab, situated northwest of the temple area. From Hay's sketch map, it is also clear that the tell was already partly destroyed by the *sebakhin* at the time of his visit.⁹

The Hay-papers also contain several undated sketch drawings that are of particular interest. The drawings are executed by an experienced hand and were beyond doubt made on the spot without further corrections. A first drawing, numbered "140" (Fig. 3), shows two conspicuous buildings, visibly built in stone of which the left one is still partly preserved up to the roof. The building on

⁶ Edward William Lane does not mention this part of the Great Walls either (see *infra*, p. 200).

⁷ See for instance William Hamilton who was in Elkab in December 1801 (Hamilton 1809: 91: "The walls of the ancient town reach to within a few yards of the right bank of the river, inclosing an oblong square of eighteen hundred by sixteen hundred feet"). See also Hendrickx et al. 2010: 147.

⁸ For a more extensive discussion of the destruction of the southern corner of the Great Walls, see Hendrickx et al. 2010: 147-152. See also Capart 1946: 166, who believes that this part of the Great Walls was already taken down to reuse the mud bricks for the construction of the Roman fortress (see Hendrickx & Huyge 1989: n°15 for further references).

⁹ The Hay map is possibly the oldest reference to *sebkah* digging which is generally recognised to have been deployed on a large scale in Egypt from the 1830s onwards (Bailey 1999: 211).



Fig. 3. Drawing “140” by Robert Hay, ca. 1825. View on the tell, the small temple, the main temples and part of the temple enclosure and the Great Walls of Elkab (by permission of the British Library, Add MS 29832, f. 140r).

the right side consists of two rows of columns surmounted by their architraves. In between, we can see the remains of what seems to be a mud brick wall. Another long mud brick wall with an entrance gate and a ramp is visible on the right side of the drawing. On the left-hand side, Hay has drawn a high mound with a slight slope on which the distinct ruins of several large buildings can be discerned. In the foreground, below the hill, are the remains of a rectangular ruined construction which also figures in some of Hay’s other drawings, as well as in a drawing made by Lane (see *infra*, p. 200-201). It most probably corresponds to a small building which he marked as “Q” on his map but that also figures on the maps of the temple area made by Somers Clarke (Sayce & Clarke 1905: 245, fig. 2; Clarke 1922: 22, pl. V (designated as “D”), see also Fig. 11). In both cases, this small edifice is labelled as a “*small temple*”. The two stone buildings are also present, in almost identical shape, in older, as well as slightly younger drawings.¹⁰ They represent, respectively, parts of the sanctuary of the temple of Sobek and Thoth, and the hypostyle hall of the temple of Nekhbet. The mud brick wall in between can therefore be identified as the northern corner and part of the north-western course of the temple enclosure, and the long mud brick wall on the right is the portion seen when looking toward the north-eastern section of the Great Walls. The latter wall, and in particular, the orientation of the ramp, is a decisive element to determine Hay’s viewpoint. In total,

¹⁰ For an older drawing, see *Description de l’Égypte. Antiquités*, vol. I: pl. 66. For younger ones, see the drawing made by Lane (see *infra*, Fig. 5) but also drawings made by Algernon Percy (Lord Prudhoe), now kept in the family archive in Alnwick Castle, or by John Gardner Wilkinson which are held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.



Fig. 4. Drawing “104” by Robert Hay, ca. 1828. View on the tell, the small temple and part of the temple enclosure and the Great Walls of Elkab (by permission of the British Library, Add MS 29832, f. 104r).

three ramps give access to the top of the Great Walls. They are all situated on the inner side of the north-eastern, the north-western and the south-eastern sections of the Great Walls. No traces of a ramp have ever been found at the south-western wall. Hay’s drawing shows a ramp that leads up from right to left. Standing in front of the different ramps, only the one against the north-eastern wall has the same orientation. Hence, taking also into account the perspective of the temples and the temple enclosure, the drawing should be regarded as showing a view towards the north from a position south of the temples (Fig. 10a & 11).¹¹

On another sketch, numbered “104” (Fig. 4), the temples are no longer depicted.¹² Only the base of the outer western wall of the temple of Sobek and Thoth can still vaguely be discerned. Instead, we see a full view on what is without any doubt again the north-western section of the temple enclosure. The tell

¹¹ The Hay-papers also contain a drawing that seems to be a more or less exact copy of drawing “140”, this time, however, without the temples. As this drawing does not provide any additional information with regard to the location of the tell, it will not be discussed here.

¹² Because this drawing does not show the standing remains of the temples, it must be dated, like the drawing mentioned in the previous note, after November 1828 when the temples of Elkab were most certainly almost completely dismantled (De Meulenaere 1969: 20-21; Vanlathem 1987: 34, n°2). Consequently, drawing “140” must have been made before that date, most probably at the same time when Hay also drew his map.

is drawn in a nearly identical way as in drawing “140” and in the foreground, somewhat hidden behind the vegetation, we can also recognise the so-called small temple. The Great Walls are not drawn but from the position of the small temple and the perspective on the temple enclosure, Hay’s viewpoint must be located towards the southern corner of the latter enclosure wall, not far from the spot where he made drawing “140” (Fig. 10b & 11).

Edward William Lane (1826)

The British orientalist Edward William Lane (1801–†1876) (Thompson 2010; Bierbrier 2019: 263), whose work mainly focused on modern Egypt, was among the leading scholars of his time. Between 1825 and 1849, he made several voyages through Egypt which resulted in a number of very influential books such as his *Manners and Customs of the modern Egyptians*, published in 1836. One major work however remained unpublished until 2000 when Jason Thompson finally edited Lane’s *Description of Egypt*¹³ which was based on his work during his first trip to Egypt between 1825 and 1828.

During 10 months in 1826 he travelled up the Nile as far as the Second Cataract. On May 12th, Lane visited Elkab, which he described in chapter 28 of his *Description* (Lane 2000: 398-408). Like many other travellers, he lingered over the temples and the decorated rock tombs but his description of the Elkab monuments starts off with a short but interesting passage on the tell and the Great Walls. According to Lane, within the Great Walls is located “*a smaller space, near the river, towards the left angle [= western corner of the Great Walls], occupied by high mounds and brick ruins, which appear to be remains of a more modern town: among them are many brick arches*”. Clearly, Lane had read the *Description de l’Égypte* but he also makes a new and interesting observation. He states that these mounds and ruins are “*enclosed by a wall, of which a considerable portion remains. The rest of the great area is quite clear of rubbish [...]. The ruins of several small temples are still seen there. These are all on the south-east of the mounds above mentioned*”. Because Lane mentioned the Great Walls at the beginning of his description and a separate passage was dedicated to the temple area, in our opinion this “enclosing wall” refers to the Old Kingdom Double Walls which were originally covered by the tell and became visible as a result of *sebkah* digging. However, he did not specifically mention two parallel walls, which indicates that he most likely only saw the inner wall of the Double Walls.¹⁴

¹³ Lane had drafted three versions of this *Description*. The first manuscript is kept in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (MS. Eng. misc. d. 234), the second in the archives of the Griffith Institute, Oxford, and a third one in the British Library in London (Add MS 34080-88). On the history of Lane’s *Description* and the different reasons why it was left unpublished, see Thompson 1996; Lane 2000: xiv-xxv.

¹⁴ From the map by Robert Hay (see *infra*, p. 194), we know that the *sebkah* dug from south to north and therefore must have cleared the inner wall first.



Fig. 5. Drawing by Edward William Lane, 1826. View on the tell, the small temple, the main temples and part of the temple enclosure and the Great Walls of Elkab (Lane 2000: fig. 126).

Lane's notes leave again no doubt about the existence of a tell, situated to the northwest of the temple area. One passage at the beginning of his description also contradicts the map from the *Description de l'Égypte*. According to Lane, "*the space occupied by the ancient city [= area within the Great Walls] is enclosed, on three sides, by a very strong wall of crude bricks, still remaining in a very extraordinary state of preservation: the fourth side is bounded by the river*". This implies that one side of the Great Walls must have been invisible when Lane visited Elkab and seems to confirm the map by Robert Hay on which the south-western course of the Great Walls is not depicted either (see *supra*, p. 196).

Lane's *Description of Egypt* also contains an interesting drawing which is almost identical to Hay's drawing "140" (Fig. 5). Lane's drawing was made with the aid of a camera lucida, ascertaining an accurate rendering of reality but the drawing now preserved in the British Library is a reworking (Lane 2000: i, xiv) of his now lost original. On the far left, Lane drew part of a slope with the remains of buildings which undoubtedly correspond to his "*high mountains and brick ruins*". In the central part of the drawing, the main temples can easily be identified. The small temple is depicted as well, this time however on the right-hand side of the sketch. To the left of the main temples, we can also recognise the remaining part of the north-western course of the temple enclosure. Today, this part of the temple enclosure is almost completely destroyed; its northern corner collapsed as recently as 1981 following heavy rains.¹⁵ Only a part in the middle of this enclosure, at the point where it touches the Double Walls, is still standing to a considerable height. The general shape of this particular part of the wall corresponds well with, and is also clearly recognisable as, the extreme

¹⁵ On the gradual destruction of the temple enclosure over time, see Hendrickx et al. 2010: 158, fig. 11-14.

left end of the temple enclosure as it was pictured in Hay's drawing "104". In the background, part of the Great Walls is visible which, based on the orientation of the access ramp, can again only be its north-eastern section. Compared to the more frontal view on the temples and the temple enclosure in Hay's drawings, and the fact that the small temple is situated on the right-hand side, Lane must have made this drawing from a spot immediately west of the latter building. From this perspective, the tell is again situated west of the temple area (Fig. 10c & 11).

Anton von Prokesch-Osten (1827)

Anton von Prokesch-Osten (1795–†1876) (Bierbrier 2019: 378) was an Austrian diplomat who was sent on a mission to the Middle East in 1824. Because of his great knowledge of the language and local customs of the region, he became a highly esteemed Orientalist. Chapter 20 of his *Erinnerungen aus Aegypten und Kleinasien*, published between 1829 and 1931, gives a detailed description of the tombs and temples of Elkab but also mentions on p. 246 that "*Die Umwallung der Stadt [= the Great Walls] umschließt einen hügel nahe am Ufer*". The description of the position of this "hill" corresponds well with the location of the "*ruines de constructions en briques*" from the *Description* and with what we know from the documentation of Hay and Lane. On the same page, von Prokesch-Osten also makes an interesting observation when he most likely also mentions the Old Kingdom Double Walls: "*vom Thore in der ONO Seite zieht eine Scheide, 5'9" dick und gleichfalls aus ungebrannten Ziegeln, nach dem hügel und dessen Abhang hinauf, als habe man diesen Theil der Stadt absondern wollen*". Despite some confusion regarding the orientation of the described features, Hendrickx & Huyge, have already convincingly argued that this "*Scheide*" can only be part of the inner wall of the Double Walls (Hendrickx et al. 2010: 163).¹⁶

Nestor L'Hôte (1829 & 1838)

The French archaeologist Nestor L'Hôte (1804–†1842) (Vandier d'Abbadie 1963: 1-11; Harlé & Lefebvre 1993: 16-25; Bierbrier 2019: 281-282) was a gifted artist and it was precisely in this capacity that he joined the Franco-Tuscan expedition to Egypt and Nubia (1828-1830) led by Jean-François Champollion and Ippolito Rossellini. Afterwards, he made two additional trips to Egypt to complete his documentation. A small number of his drawings appeared in Champollion's *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie* (1845) and Rossellini's

¹⁶ Note that Lane also mentions a single enclosing wall and not two parallel walls.



Fig. 6. Drawing by Nestor L'Hôte, 1829. View of the tell of Elkab (Harlé & Lefebvre 1993: 243).

I monumenti dell'Egitto e della Nubia, disegnati dalla spedizione scientifico-letteraria Toscana in Egitto (1832-1844) but the majority of his work was never published. His papers are now kept in the National Library of France (NAF 20394-20415) and in the Louvre museum (E.25423a-b).

L'Hôte visited Elkab twice, and on both occasions he made a drawing of the tell. The first drawing (Fig. 6) was made in 1829 during his exploration of the site with the Franco-Tuscan mission and shows a full and clear view of the tell where several ruined buildings with high walls and one arch are recognisable. In the central part, just in front of the arch, two high, massive brick walls are pictured. They are the main feature in the drawing and can also be recognised in a drawing from Lepsius' *Denkmäler* (see *infra*, Fig. 9). No other distinct features such as the temple enclosure or the Great Walls are shown. According to L'Hôte, the tell is located in the northern part of the area within the Great Walls and extends toward the centre (Harlé & Lefebvre 1993: 243). Curiously, this position deviates from all the other sources that situate the tell in the western part of the area within the Great Walls.

In L'Hôte's second drawing (Fig. 7), the tell is positioned differently. This drawing, which is part of the documents that relate to his second visit to Elkab,¹⁷ presents a view from outside and at a considerable distance from the Great Walls. More or less in the centre of the drawing, one can see a hill that towers above the Great Walls. Remains of buildings are visible on top of this hill leaving no

¹⁷ Letters from the same lot indicate that he arrived at Elkab on May 23rd, 1838 and that he spent six complete days primarily documenting the desert temples in the Wadi Hellal. Some of these letters were published in 1840, including the one on Elkab. See L'Hôte 1840: 12-20.



Fig. 7. Drawing by Nestor L'Hôte, 1838. View on the Great Walls and the tell of Elkab (by permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, NAF 20396, f. 14).

doubt of its identification as the Elkab tell. The decisive element for determining the location from where L'Hôte made this drawing is the position of the entrance gate visible in the Great Walls. Only its north-eastern course has a central entrance gate. The gates in the south-eastern and the north-western wall are situated more towards the corner, while the preserved part of the south-western wall has no entrance gate. As such, there can be no doubt that this drawing was made from a point in the mouth of the Wadi Hellal which is situated to the northeast of the Great Walls. Given its central position in the drawing, the tell should be located, like in all other sources, in the western part of the ground enclosed by the Great Walls, not in the northern half. It should also to be noted that the tell does not seem to extend all the way to the northern part of the Great Walls.

Karl Richard Lepsius and the Prussian expedition to Egypt (1843-1844)

Karl Richard Lepsius (1810–†1884) (Freier 2006; Mehlitz 2011; Bierbrier 2019: 277-278; Lepper & Hafemann 2012) can be considered a true giant of Egyptology. His Prussian expedition to Egypt and Nubia between 1842 and 1845 is one of the great milestones in the history of Egyptology and led to the publication of the famous *Denkmäler* that produced the first truly scientific recordings of ancient Egyptian monuments. One of the great merits of this monumental publication are the accurate maps of the different sites. Such is also the case

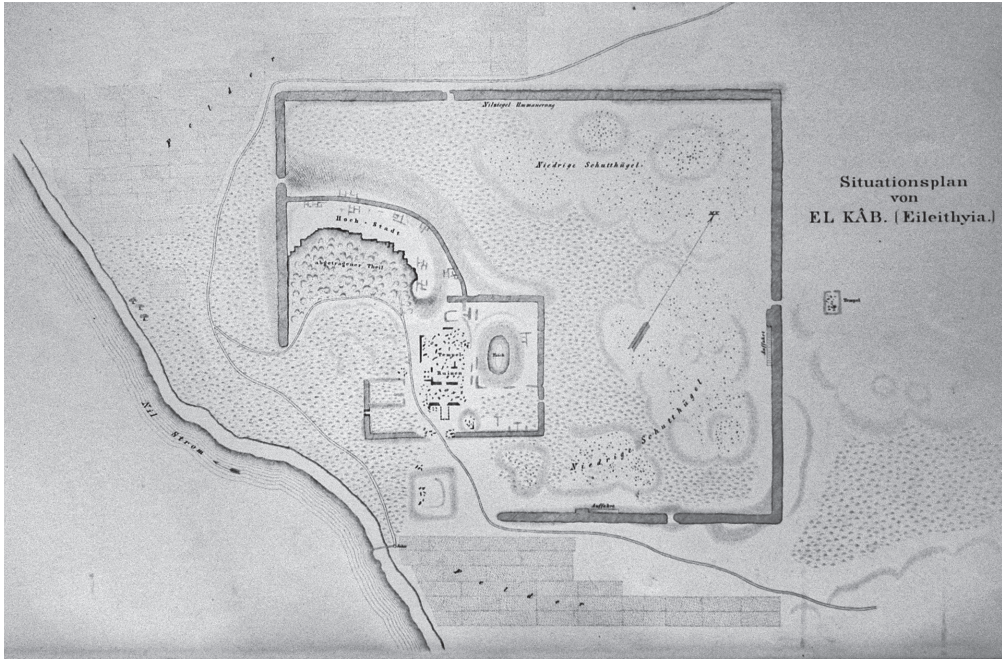


Fig. 8. Map of Elkab by the Prussian expedition to Egypt, 1843-1844 (Lepsius 1849-1859: Abth. I: Bl. 100).

for Elkab and the map published in the *Denkmäler* (Fig. 8) can be considered the first accurate recording of the Great Walls and the area inside. Compared to the maps of the *Description* and the one by Robert Hay, the temples and their enclosure wall are positioned correctly. This map also contains several important elements with regard to the location of the Elkab settlement.

The Double Walls are clearly indicated and border an area labelled as “Hochstadt” and “abgetragener Theil”. The remains of walls are also indicated in the “Hochstadt”. There can be no doubt that this refers to, respectively, the tell and the part that is being dug away by the *sebakhin*. This confirms the earlier observations by Hay and shows that the *sebakhin* worked roughly from south to north. The map also seems to indicate that the Double Walls apparently more or less delineate the northern limit of the settled area. In this respect, this map clearly differs from the map of the *Description* and the one by Robert Hay, where the tell is depicted in direct relation to the north-western part of the Great Walls. This is not the case on the map of the *Denkmäler* from which it seems that the tell did not extend far north of the Double Walls. Besides the map, the *Denkmäler* also contains a full-page drawing (Fig. 9), presenting a view towards the west from the top of the eastern corner of the Great Walls. The Nile is shown on the left side of the drawing which leaves no doubt about its orientation. The



Fig. 9. Detail of drawing by the Prussian expedition to Egypt, 1843-1844.
View on the temple enclosure and tell of Elkab
(detail of Lepsius 1849-1859: Abth. I: Bl. 99).

temple enclosure is visible more or less in the centre, and the tell rises up behind it. Two large walls stand out and may well be the same ones as the two massive walls on L'Hôte's drawing (see *supra*; Fig. 6). According to Lepsius, the tell is almost twice as high as the Great Walls (35 to 40 feet against 20 to 25 feet for the Great Walls) and is described as follows: "*Der ganze künstliche Unterbau für diese besteht aus ausgefüllter Nilerde, die zwischen gebauten Mauern von ungebrannten Nilziegeln geschüttet ist*" (Naville & Sethe 1901: 36).

Conclusions

From the above documents, we obtain quite a clear picture of the general location and extent of the Elkab tell. Ignoring the mistake made by L'Hôte during his first visit to the site, all the available sources agree that a large tell occupied the ground immediately northwest of the main temples of Elkab and extending to the southwest (Fig. 10 & 11). This tell was definitely situated against the south-western section of the Great Walls, but also covered the curved Old Kingdom Double Walls that run from the north-western section of the temple enclosure to the south-western part of the Great Walls. Although these Double Walls are only clearly visible on the map from Lepsius' *Denkmäler*, it looks as though they more or less represent the northern limit of the area once occupied by the tell. From Hay's notes, we know that this tell must have been at least 30 m high. The sketch map by Hay and the map from the *Denkmäler* also indicate that the tell developed against the north-western wall of the temple enclosure. This enclosure has severely suffered from gradual destruction that can be clearly traced over time (Hendrickx et al. 2010: 158, fig. 11-14). A large part of its north-western section, which is still preserved to a height of about 11 m, shows several diagonal traces that run upwards from the northeast to the southwest and

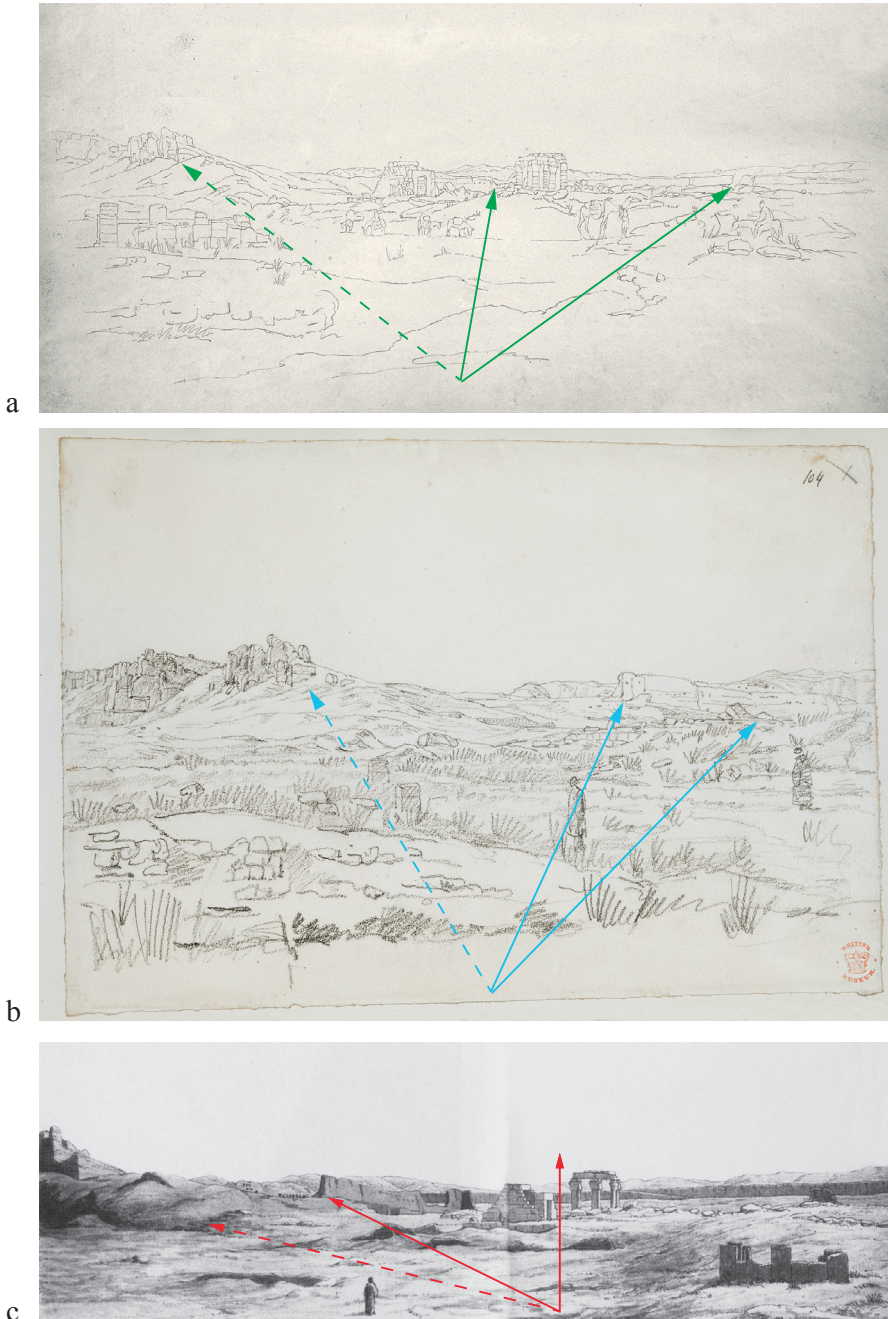


Fig. 10. Determination of the viewpoint of the different drawings. a) Drawing “140” by Robert Hay, b) Drawing “104” by Robert Hay, c) Drawing by Edward William Lane. The location of the tell is indicated with the dashed arrow.

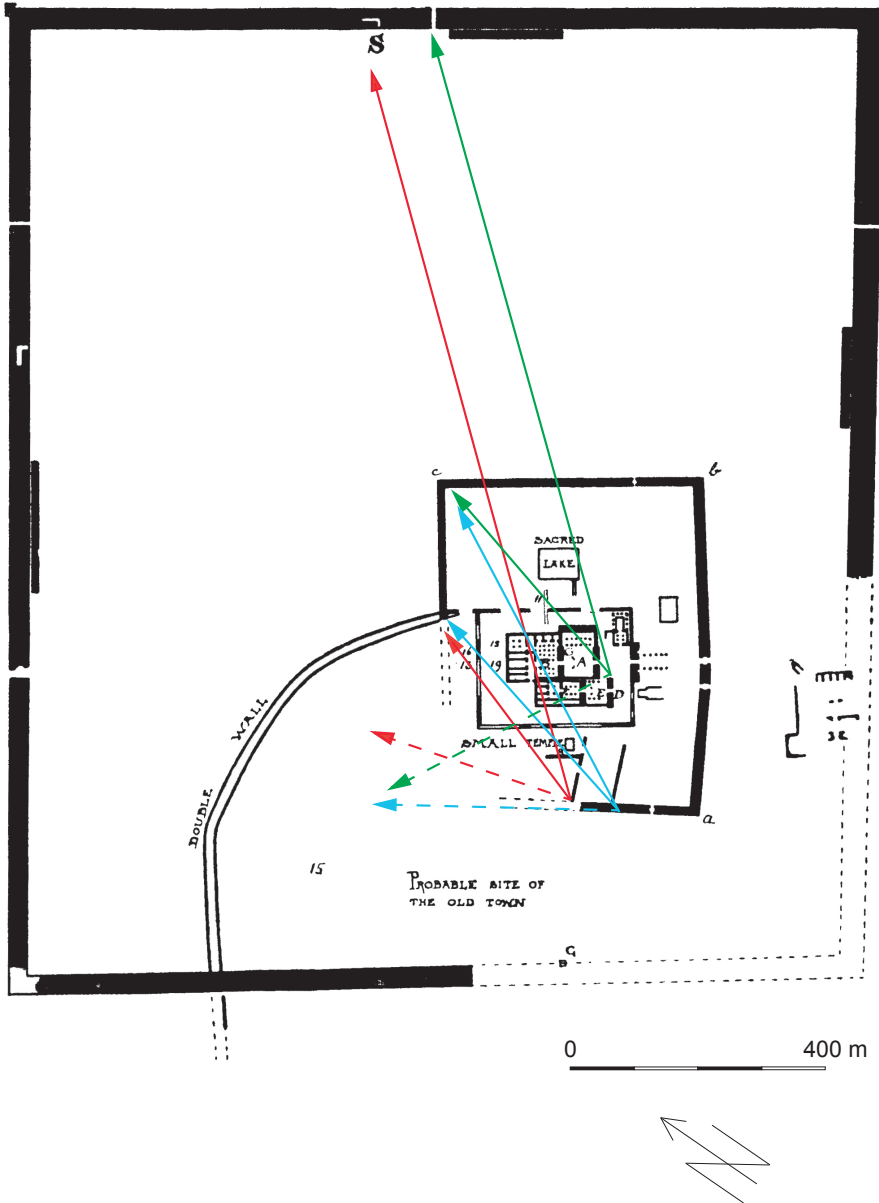


Fig. 11. Map of Elkab with indication of the viewpoint of Robert Hay's drawing "140" (green), drawing "104" (blue) and the drawing of Edward William Lane (red). The location of the tell is indicated with the dashed arrow (map modified after Sayce & Clarke 1905: 245, fig. 2).

are beyond doubt the negative traces of the tell that was leaning against this part of the temple enclosure. We have seen above that this specific part of this wall is also clearly recognisable in some of the above-mentioned drawings, particularly those made by Lane and Hay. Whether or not the tell extended as far north as the north-western section of the Great Walls, or perhaps even covered or developed over this part of the wall remains speculative, although the drawing of L'Hôte suggests that this was not the case (Fig. 7). In the end, only excavations in the area concerned could solve this question beyond doubt. This northern extension is clearly visible on the map from the *Description* and in the sketch map made by Hay but it is not depicted as such on the map from the *Denkmäler*. Whether or not, the tell extended all the way to the north cannot be stated with absolute certainty because the available maps contradict each other. As the latter map is almost 20 years younger, a possible explanation could be that, as a result of intensive *sebakhin*-activity, the original extent and location of the tell had already been seriously altered when the expedition of Lepsius mapped the site. On the other hand, as we have seen above, questions can be raised about the accuracy of the two former maps.

Unfortunately, visible traces of this tell can no longer be seen on the surface today. As stated above, Clarke already noticed in 1893 that this particular area was covered with tons of pottery and town debris, indicating that the *sebakhin* had done their work thoroughly and that nothing was left of the original tell that once stood at Elkab. A few years later, and with the permission of Gaston Maspero, many tons of the remaining sherds left by the *sebakhin* were subsequently removed for the construction of the Luxor-Aswan railroad (Clarke 1921: 59). In little more than half a century, every trace of the once impressive tell of Elkab had disappeared. However, the surface of the area where the tell once stood is still at least 1.5 m higher than the ground to the north of the Double Walls.¹⁸ This suggested that the tell was not removed entirely and that its lower occupation levels could still be preserved. Small-scale test excavations between 1902 and 1904 by Archibald H. Sayce, Somers Clarke and Frederic W. Green confirmed the presence of settlement remains in this area (Sayce & Clarke 1905: 257-272) but their importance was not recognised. Additional excavations by the Belgian mission between 1937 and 1968 revealed several mud brick structures and other settlement remains (Capart 1940; Gilbert 1955, 1955-1957, 1958, 1959; De Meulenaere 1970, Vermeersch 1978: 135-144; Hendrickx & Eyckerman 2009) but they were not linked to the lost tell. The importance and the extent of the remaining settlement layers was only realised from 2009 onwards when systematic archaeological research in the area began (Rowland et al. 2009; Huyge 2013; Claes et al. 2014; Hendrickx et al. 2016; Claes & Huyge 2016).

¹⁸ The average height of the area west of the Double Walls is around 82.50 m ASL, the area north of these walls is around 81 m ASL.

Addendum

During a re-examination of the Burton archives (British Library, Add MS 25648) in October 2018, a sketch map of the Elkab region was found that was unknown to us at the time this contribution was written. The map was made between 1825 and 1832 and shows the Great Walls in the wider landscape of Elkab. Like on the map of the *Description de l'Égypte*, all four sides of the Great Walls are drawn as well as the north-eastern and part of the north-western section of the temple enclosure. In the lower half of the area inside the Great Walls, Burton seems to have roughly sketched the outline of the Elkab tell. Based on this sketch, it seems that the tell extended beyond the Old Kingdom Double Walls, as far as the north-western corner of the Great Walls but that it is not covering the south-western part of the latter wall. For the first time, we also have an indication regarding the southern extension of the tell which seems to stretch out almost until the now missing south-western corner.

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