

Finds from Elkab: revealing the origins of the settlement

It is one of the best accessible early settlements in the Nile Valley, yet Elkab has remained under-researched for a long time. **Wouter Claes** and **Dirk Huyge** report on new findings that help to complement our understanding of Egypt's earliest urbanism.

Elkab was an important provincial centre during the early stages of Egyptian history. Despite over a century of intensive archaeological research, our knowledge of its occupational history is still limited and biased. Past research has focussed primarily on the large funerary and religious monuments, with little attention devoted to the study of the settlement. Since 2009, the Royal

Museums of Art and History in Brussels have been carrying out new excavations in the settlement area of Elkab. These excavations have yielded important new information regarding the early occupation of the site and the origin and establishment of the town.

The ancient town of Elkab is situated within the large Late Period 'Great Walls', immediately

The settlement area of Elkab situated within the Late Period 'Great Walls'.



Image: Google Earth



View of the Old Kingdom silo complex excavated in 1955 by the Belgian Mission.

west of the temple area, and it is bordered to the north by the remains of a curved double wall that dates to the late Old Kingdom. A large *tell* once stood in this area, which was almost entirely destroyed by the *sebakhin* (diggers of *sebakh*, organic compost often formed from mud-brick and settlement debris, which can be used as fertiliser) in the course of the 19th century. Based on descriptions and drawings by early travellers and Egyptologists, this *tell* was roughly oval in shape, at least 30 m high and covered an area of about 300 m by 170 m. This settlement area never received great attention from archaeologists working at Elkab due to the extreme extent of disturbance and destruction. However, several previous archaeological finds attest to the presence of Old Kingdom, Early Dynastic and Predynastic settlement remains. Already in 1903, the British archaeologist Frederick W. Green demonstrated the presence of in situ archaeological remains to a depth of almost

4 m below the actual surface in the area where the *tell* once stood. In 1938, Jean Capart excavated a number of granaries in the temple area, revealing a large number of Second Dynasty seal impressions mentioning the title 'Inspector of Elkab'. Immediately west of the temples, a large Old Kingdom storage facility was excavated in 1955 (see image above), which contained, in addition to the Old Kingdom material, several reused Predynastic objects (see image on the next page). Finally, in 1968–1969, black-topped and rippled sherds were found in the same area, the latter indicating the presence of the early Predynastic Badari culture at Elkab. These finds suggested that substantial in situ remains of the original settlement could still be found. Moreover, they also hinted at the possible Predynastic origin of the settlement.

Since 2009, the Belgian mission has excavated over 15 test trenches and pits, spread out across different locations within the habitation



Ellipsoid Badari palette found in silo N of the Old Kingdom silo complex.

area. They revealed the presence of a vast settlement, possibly 4–5 hectares, with well-preserved mud-brick buildings and other settlement remains, dating from the final phases of Egyptian prehistory to the early phases of pharaonic civilization. The archaeological material, supported by a series of radiocarbon dates, indicates that the origin of the settlement goes back to the Badari period. The Badari settlement at Elkab may or may not have been of a seasonal character, but there is no doubt that from the Naqada I period onwards, the site was continuously inhabited until Graeco-Roman times.

The horizontal distribution of the different archaeological features and the geo-

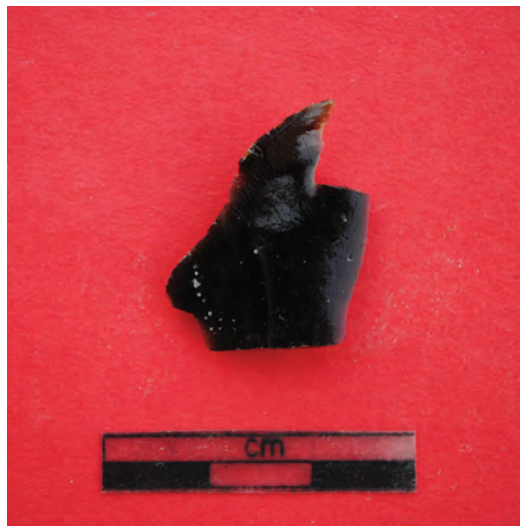
morphological study of the surrounding landscape indicate that the earliest phases of occupation (Badari through Naqada periods) were spatially restricted to a large sand dune that emerged above the floodplain and which protected the settlement against the annual Nile flood. Six test pits revealed stratified habitation remains, dispersed over a depth of almost 3 m and dating to all the different phases of the Predynastic period. Preliminary analysis of the archaeological and faunal material indicates that this small community based its subsistence primarily on farming and fishing, but there is also ample evidence for specialised workshops (for instance, bone or wood working). Moreover, the rare discovery in a



Elizabeth Hart Skarzynski documenting the different Predynastic occupation phases in the sand dune.

Naqada II context of a small fragment of obsidian of Ethiopian origin hints at Elkab's involvement in long distance contacts at a very early stage in Egyptian history.

During the Early Dynastic period and early Old Kingdom, the settlement expanded into the floodplain, undoubtedly as a result of increasing population pressure. The most substantial architectural remains were discovered in trenches 2 and 3, situated on the alluvial plain close to the Nile, where several well-preserved mud-brick buildings clearly attest to some degree of urban planning. Although the functional analysis of the archaeological material unambiguously points to household activities, illustrating daily life at the site, one building, given a stone foundation and dating to the Second Dynasty, is unmistakably of special importance. Indeed, the use of stone in such early Egyptian architecture is exceptional and almost exclusively reserved for tombs, temples and large state-controlled buildings. This building, which was in use for a very long time, also determined the orientation of contemporary and later constructions of the Third-Fourth Dynasties that were built in its immediate vicinity. Its oldest floor level was covered by a layer of debris containing several large and well-preserved burnt wooden beams, which most likely belong to the collapsed roof of the building. On top of this floor level, several intact objects were found, including two pots, several sickle blades and unworked stones, a crucible, a Clayton disk and a large fossilized bone. The crucible, together with the discovery of a small furnace for copper melting in the nearby trench 2, clearly indicates the



Small obsidian fragment of Ethiopian origin found in a Naqada II context.



Clayton disk, found on the floor level of the 2nd dynasty building.

presence of specialized workshops for metal production. This is among the earliest direct evidence for ancient Egyptian metallurgy and furnishes additional proof for state-controlled activities at Elkab. The oldest occupation level in this area consists of a thick and compact layer of mud bricks that originally belonged to a solid wall almost 30 cm thick, which



Crucible with traces of copper particles, found on the floor level of the 2nd dynasty building.



Top: view of the Second Dynasty building with part of the stone foundation exposed and the wooden beams of the collapsed roof.

Above: small furnace for copper melting from trench 2.

Bottom: First Dynasty occupation level found below the foundation of the Second Dynasty building.



subsequently collapsed. Based on the associated ceramics and confirmed by the radiocarbon dating of a small fireplace, this oldest building phase dates back to the First Dynasty. Below this level, excavations reached the top of the sterile floodplain deposits.

Our current knowledge of Egyptian settlements can at best be defined as theoretical, biased and incomplete. Settlement patterns, organisation and transformation are still poorly understood. This state of affairs is the result of several factors, including the foci of previous researchers, and the locational aspects of the sites, which are often in positions that hamper or even prevent their archaeological investigation. Earlier work and the preliminary results of the new excavations indicate that Elkab is one of the largest known Predynastic and Old Kingdom settlement sites in Egypt. Furthermore, it is also one of the best accessible early settlements in the Nile Valley (since the later strata of the town have been removed by the *sebakhin*). With few exceptions, most other sites in the region have been completely destroyed by the *sebakhin* or expanding cultivation. Others are covered by a very thick layer of Nile alluvium or modern towns and cities. Elkab may be the only site in the Upper Egyptian Nile Valley where a continuous occupation, from the Badari period (c. 4500 BC) through the early Old Kingdom (c. 2600-2500 BC), can be studied in great detail. As such, the site presents a unique opportunity to document the gradual transition from a prehistoric village lifestyle to a fully-developed Old Kingdom urban society.

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