THE MUSEUM’S EXCAVATIONS AT HIERAKONPOLIS

At the end of the season of 1933–1934 the Museum’s Expedition completed its work at Lisht and gave up its concession there. The rules under which foreign institutions are permitted to conduct excavation in Egypt allow the holding of two concessions by each institution. The Museum had long wished to obtain an Old Kingdom site, since that period is less well represented in its collections than the other important periods in the history of Egyptian art. Unfortunately all the Memphite sites were held by other institutions or formed part of a large reserve which the Egyptian Government was retaining for its own excavators. Consequently we were forced to look elsewhere for a site which might contain Old Kingdom material. The most attractive one available seemed to be the site of ancient Hierakonpolis, which, in addition to being one of the chief centers of culture during the predynastic period and the earliest dynasties, was of some importance during the Old Kingdom. A cemetery, which quite evidently had never been thoroughly cleared, contained two painted tombs attributed to the Sixth Dynasty, and it was hoped that the Expedition might find objects there which would be valuable to our collections.

Camping equipment and workmen were moved by truck from Thebes to Hierakonpolis—a distance of sixty miles. The tents were pitched (fig. 1), and on the first of March work was begun on the Old Kingdom cemetery. The two decorated tombs contained nothing but drift sand. That the forecourt on which both of them open would prove more rewarding was evident when only a little of the debris had been cleared away (fig. 2). Before long we came upon mud-brick walls, and these, it developed, were built on the debris and not on the rock floor. It was here, only the second day after we had begun our work, that we made the most interesting find of the whole six weeks’ campaign. A thick slab of limestone, lying face down beside one of the walls, turned out to be a stela with a long inscription. The pictures of the owner and his wife are extremely provincial in character, and the inscription is written in crude hieroglyphs (fig. 3). It is not, however, its artistic quality which makes this an interesting object but rather the content of the text. The name of the owner, Ḥar-em-kha’u-ef, “Horus in his glorious appearances,” is identical with that of the smaller of the two decorated tombs. That was natural enough, yet it gave us rather a shock, for we had picked out this particular spot on account of its supposed Old Kingdom date and it did not take much study to show that the stela was of the Middle Kingdom. But an even greater surprise was in store for us when it became possible to examine the stela at leisure. The inscription starts off, in a manner common enough to such monuments, with statements about the worthiness of the owner. He tells us that he had fed the hungry and clothed the poor. Then he goes on: “Horus, avenger-of-his-father, charged me with a mission to the court in order to bring (the images of) Horus of Nekhen and (of) his mother Isis, the justified. He commissioned me captain of a vessel and its crew because he considered me a competent official of his temple, alert in the performance of his ritual. So I fared downstream in the fine boat, and I brought forth (the images of) Horus of Nekhen and of his mother, this goddess, in the beautiful palace of Ith-towe in the presence of the king himself.”

Here was indeed an astonishing coincidence. Not only did the stela we had found belong to the Middle Kingdom, but its owner was a man who had had a definite connection with our old site at Lisht, the ancient Ith-towe. Ḥar-em-kha’u-ef was chief...
priest of Horus of Nekhen, the particular form in which the falcon god was worshiped at Hierakonpolis. We do not know very slimmer than the ladies of her day. Nekhen was a long way from the capital city, and life there must have been rather boresome.

The business of running the temple as its chief priest probably took no great amount of energy, but then it did not afford him very much of a living, if we may estimate his wealth by the meager tomb which he made

FIG. 1. THE CAMP AT HIERAKONPOLIS. VIEW LOOKING SOUTHEASTWARD WITH THE FORT IN THE BACKGROUND

FIG. 2. "OLD KINGDOM HILL": FORECOURT OF THE TWO DECORATED TOMBS
for himself. Ḥar-em-khařu-ef must have occasionally had yearnings to see the gay life of the big city. Just how he managed it remains a matter for speculation; probably possible that the statue was made to nod when the question was put to it. The visit to Ith-towe was apparently the high spot in the priest's life. The presentation of the in some way Horus of Nekhen, the figure of the falcon god in the temple, indicated a desire to be taken down to the court to be introduced to the king. Instances of divine assent exist in ancient Egypt, and it is

\[ J.H. Breasted, A History of Egypt, pp. 267, 268. \]
priests in Ith-towe and to make a side trip to Memphis to see the sights of that, even then, monumental city.

The figure of Horus of Nekhen referred to in this tale may well have been the Sixth Dynasty copper statue of the falcon which was worshiped in the temple of Hierakonpolis. When it was found in 1898, the copper had disintegrated, but the golden head and plumed crown are preserved to this day in the Cairo Museum. It is not often that, after the passage of so many centuries, we can say with any degree of certitude that an inscription refers to a particular statue.

In the hope that the Middle Kingdom tombs were concealing earlier ones in the “Old Kingdom Hill,” we continued our clearing there. Nothing was found, however, except tombs and a few objects characteristic of the Middle Kingdom and the period immediately following. Traces of Late Dynastic occupation were also present. In the meantime exploratory digging was being done on various other parts of the site.

The desert at Hierakonpolis is dominated by a fort of mud brick which, it has been assumed, dates from the Second Dynasty and which is one of the oldest mud-brick buildings still standing in Egypt (fig. 4). It lies on the north bank of a wadi, a dry valley.

Pottery was, of course, the most frequent item produced. It is very beautiful pottery, too, in spite of the fact that it was all shaped without the use of the wheel (fig. 6). Far from being crude, the forms and the surfaces are finer, if anything, than those of the best pottery of the dynastic period. Most of the vessels are undecorated, but one type of buff ware gives us what is, without doubt, the beginning of representative art in Egypt. On some of the more elaborate pots are pictures of birds and trees, on a few are the well-known multi-oared boats (fig. 5). On others a very simple stage of decoration is present—spirals or zigzags painted in red on the smooth surface of the ware or a mere spattering of the darker color. Not that these simpler forms presuppose an earlier date for the desert extending out into the desert. The bench between the fort and the valley bed was supposed to be the site of a Twelfth Dynasty cemetery. In view of the fact that what had been considered Old Kingdom tombs turned out to be Middle Kingdom, we thought that here the reverse might be true and so put a few men to work at this point. It soon turned out, however, that the remains were predynastic. About a hundred graves in all were cleared.

FIG. 4. THE FORT AT HIERAKONPOLIS WITH THE PREDynastic CEMETERY IN THE FOREGROUND
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this particular type of pottery. One of the interesting points which excavating brings to light is the fact that, while an early style may be assumed to be simple, it is likely to continue for a long time after more elaborate designs have been introduced. Change will undoubtedly take place and degradation occur, but a given element of decoration may endure almost indefinitely, especially in a place so little subject to change as Egypt.

Another item present in every grave, except the very poorest, was the slate palette (fig. 9). It is striking that even in so early a period of civilization, the toilet, that is to say “making up,” was one of the most important features of daily life. Galena and malachite ground up produce a black and a green powder respectively, and this was applied around the eyes. Whether there is a medicinal value in these minerals or not, the origin of their use was undoubtedly to enhance the beauty of the eyes; and so we must conclude that vanity played its part then as now, but then with men as well as with women in so far as make-up is concerned.

The form of these palettes is interesting.
Several types were found but the majority were in the shape of fish. Here we may see perhaps one of the ways in which representation in art begins. There is no obvious connection between fish, galena, malachite, and painting the eyes. How then can we account for the slate palettes’ being in the form of fish? Grinding the crystals into powder must first have been done between stones whose shapes had no significance. Slate came to be used on account of its appropriate surface and the fact that it split into thin sheets. To make it easy to carry such a palette a hole was drilled near the edge for the string. It is not unreasonable to suppose that one of these earliest palettes chanced to resemble a fish in outline. Possibly the suspension hole suggested the eye, and the owner may have modified the outline to make the resemblance more striking. Thus the connection between palette and fish was probably born, and, once born, the use spread until it became one of the standard ways to shape palettes.

The palettes also furnish us with an illustration of a common Egyptian way of thinking. Figure 7 shows three palettes of very much the same shape and size. The first is of slate—serviceable though undistinguished as to outline. The second is of sandstone, which could be used in the absence of slate. But the third is just a flat pancake of mud and could not possibly have been used to grind eye paint. Here we have an extremely early example of that habit of substitution by means of which in the furnishings of a tomb a useless object is made to take the place of a genuine article. This habit plays a tremendous part in the history of Egyptian funerary customs. In origin at least, it was responsible not only for the placing of models in tombs but also for the representation on their walls of the many scenes which enable us to become so much better acquainted with the daily life of the Egyptians than with that of other peoples of antiquity.

A few strings of beads and many bracelets were also found in these graves—the beads of stone, some glazed, and the bracelets of shell, copper, and tortoise shell (fig. 10). Stone vessels are among the choicest products of the predynastic civilization, but we were not very fortunate in discovering them. A few small ones we did find and some interesting pottery vessels of polished black ware which imitate the favorite basalt of the stoneworker (fig. 8). A beautiful alabaster bowl, with one side projecting to form a kind of spout, came from an isolated grave in a part of the cemetery lying far to the north of the fort.

The fort dominates the cemetery which we were excavating; indeed the graves extend below the heavy walls of this building. It had been erected without even a trench for its foundations, and in modern times the diggers after antiquities and fertilizer have undermined it to a great extent. The fort has long been supposed to date from the Second Dynasty, and we were fortunate enough to find evidence which tends to support this theory. As the clearing of the cemetery approached the entrance to the fort (see cover), numerous fragments of red granite began to turn up. They were inscribed with figures and hieroglyphs charac-
characteristic of the early dynastic period, and two pieces among them bore the name of Kha-
sekhemu (fig. 11) of the Second Dynasty. The granite was in very bad shape, owing to its having been burned. It seemed, in fact, to have been used in the walls of a pottery kiln. The inscribed surfaces were very crumbly and had to be solidified at once with celluloid solution. That these fragments constituted a doorjamb or stela that was once part of the fort seems certain, since no large tomb or other building exists in the neighborhood. The find came so late in the season that it is not yet possible to say whether the fragments can be fitted together and whether anything of historical interest other than their date and their connection with the fort is to be derived from the scenes or inscriptions.

Near the entrance of the fort was found an interesting pile of flints—not finished arrowheads or knives, but flakes chipped away from flint nodules in the manufacture of these early weapons. The chips lay in a small mound just as though a basketful of them had been overturned on the ground. Perhaps the soldiers in the fort had been cutting their feet on the razor-sharp edges of the chips and had been ordered to clear the floor of the enclosure. Some of the chips showed the original patinated surface of the nodule, and from the color it was quite evident that many had come from a single nodule (fig. 12). Near these flints were two bowls of a type rather earlier than the cemetery itself, which is predynastic; so it is possible that the flints date from an armed camp much earlier than the fort.
In order to survey comprehensively the possibilities of the site of Hierakonpolis, trial diggings were undertaken in outlying portions. Without a car this would have been impossible in the time we had. Remains of a predynastic town site.\(^5\) Near its center a mound of broken stone, which must have been brought from a distance, remained partly undisturbed. There was a chance that it might prove to be the tumulus over a chieftain’s grave, but clearing revealed nothing except bare rock covered by a thick crust of charred wood, bones, and other debris. It may have been a sort of community hearth for the large settlement which

occupied this site. The whole area, like most of the desert in this region, has been so thoroughly ransacked by sebbakhin (fertilizer diggers) that very little evidence other than broken sherds remained.

While we regretted this "plundering," it saved us a great deal of time and energy, since it showed more definitely than the usual surface indications on the bare desert whether anything remained underground in any given spot. The salt diggers had even gone up the rocky hill slopes in the high desert, kilometers to the west of the cultivation edge. Potsherds here and there led us for the noonday hour by the potters whose kiln we found in the valley below. Another such cleft had been used as a shelter by priests of Horus of Nekhen during the New Kingdom, to judge by the graffiti which they scratched on the cliff face (fig. 13). This cleft lay behind a hill in which are situated tombs of that period.

In all, the six weeks spent at Hierakonpolis proved well worth while, both in antiquities discovered and, for the writer at least, in experience gained. There is no doubt that the site will some day have to be dug thoroughly from one end to the other, but

FIG. 13. GRAFFITI OF THE NEW KINGDOM ON THE FACE OF THE CLIFF

on to waste time in unproductive places, but some items of interest were recovered. A horizontal fissure under an overhanging ledge high above the wadi bed gave us hopes that it sheltered a tomb. Interesting pottery of a very early period was indeed found there but nothing else, and we came to the conclusion that it had been used as a shady spot it is not certain whether the present is the time or whether it would be better that the work should wait until other more productive sites have been exhausted. In the meantime, as is the case with all isolated antique sites, plundering and sebakh digging go on in spite of all the guarding that can be done.  

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