



## INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS AT KOM EL AHMAR: A LATE PERIOD-COPTIC PERIOD SITE IN MIDDLE EGYPT

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During the 2004-2006 Middle East Survey project,<sup>1</sup> the archaeological team, directed by S. Parcak, visited and surveyed a large tell, Kom el-Ahmar (also called Kom el-Amad), first noted by W.M. F. Petrie as being “Ptolemaic and Roman” in date.<sup>2</sup> This report seeks to clarify the importance of Kom el-Ahmar, and reveals a significant role the site played in regional and international trade during the Ptolemaic to Late Roman periods. While the findings remain preliminary, the evidence shows that this site deserves more attention, and also indicates that the Hermopolite nome of Middle Egypt represented a larger cog in the economic engine of Ptolemaic-Roman Egypt.

Located along the modern desert edge, south of Tuna el-Gebel, Kom el-Ahmar covers 40 acres, with two main tells measuring 400 m x 400 m, at a maximum height of 6 m, cut through the middle by modern desert tracks. The SCA appears to own the land on which the site is located, yet much of the site is threatened by encroaching agriculture (Figure 1). The name of the site refers to the amount of dense reddish and pink ceramic material on its surface. A pedestrian survey in 10 m transects showed a significant amount of bones, suggesting the locations of ancient cemeteries, together with mud brick and stone structures just below the surface sand. In addition, the survey recorded a large, ex-situ limestone ceiling block bearing stars in raised relief, pieces of limestone vessels, small copper fragments, corroded coins (presumably representing various dates), a greenish-blue faience amulet fragment, grinding stones, a single black glass bracelet fragment, and numerous pieces from faience vessels. An overall assessment of the material culture from the site’s surface yields a date range from 600 BCE to 800 CE.

No excavation reports appear to exist for this site, while the local office of the Ministry of State for Antiquities (MSA) had no records of any excavations having taken place here. Hence, this survey promised to illuminate terra incognita. Maintaining exact 10 m spaced transects proved difficult at times, given the undulating nature of the tell surface that contained ten to fifteen different peaks within a 400 m by 400 m area. We recorded this widely undulating terrain using a differential GPS, taking over 1,200 points to generate a topographic map of the site. The

ceramic surface scatter seemed fairly uniform, with much of the pottery and other debris reflecting past through recent disturbances by sebbakheen and other agencies.



Figure 1: Overview of Kom el-Ahmar (courtesy of Google Earth)

The pottery (Figure 2), albeit only reflecting surface remains, shows a sustained and lengthy period of international trade at Kom el-Ahmar. The earliest identified jar rim sherd matches some Levantine Iron Age IIB containers that span late Dynasty 25 to the beginning of Dynasty 26; many parallels also occur at the Late Period site of Tell Tebilla.<sup>3</sup> Later long distance trade is also suggested by the presence of a Hellenistic amphora rim with rectangular handles, perhaps used to import Sicilian wine;<sup>4</sup> a groove at the base of its neck suggests a date in the 3rd Century BCE. Another early sherd, which is red-slipped and burnished, appears to be Ptolemaic in date.<sup>5</sup> Oasis ware containers from Egypt’s Western Desert also appear, with fabrics similar to Marl A4 ware.<sup>6</sup> A later potsherd, from a mid-Roman period juglet, displayed a red-slipped and burnished finish.<sup>7</sup>

Later periods of long distance trade are revealed by several African Red Slip (ARS) potsherds. One large body sherd featured rouletting, originating from a large dish with a broad, flat base, and is normally placed ca. 420-460 CE.<sup>8</sup> Another small ARS body

sherd appears to reflect a flat based dish, or a small bowl,<sup>9</sup> which are associated with date ranges from AD 280/300 - late 300/early 400. In addition, another sherd from a deep dish dates to a few decades spanning late 400 to early 500 CE.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 2: Late Period, Ptolemaic, Roman and Oasis ware sherds

Thus, what is the significance of these findings, and what do they suggest about the region as a whole during the Late Period through late Roman period? Regarding annual Nile silt deposition levels, coring reveals that the deposition rates in this region must have been higher than the standard 1m per thousand years.<sup>11</sup> Petrie's 1894 report places Kom el-Ahmar roughly 1 km west of the older desert edge, revealing how far cultivation has expanded in the past 120 years. Since late Roman remains occur 5 m below

the modern surface, the ancient fields and canals would have been much lower 1,500 years ago, suggesting that Kom el-Ahmar may have existed even deeper in the desert, perhaps as much as 1.5-2 km from the ancient floodplain edge.

It also seems likely that a monastery would have existed at Kom el-Ahmar.<sup>12</sup> At least five monasteries are known in this nome from their excavated remains at Kom el-Nana, Apa Anoup, Apa Apollo and Tiktooh at Bawit and Hermopolis Magna (the Bishop's seat), while others are attested in texts.<sup>13</sup> Given the occurrence of late Roman painted pottery at Kom el-Ahmar, the presence of regional and imported pottery, and this site's distance from the late Roman period cultivation, it would seem that Kom el-Ahmar formed a more ideal location for a major monastery with a strong role in international trade.

The regional through imported surface pottery, monumental remains (albeit ex-situ), and other indicators of wealth suggest that Kom el-Ahmar likely played a significant role in a north-south commercial network along the Nile between Elephantine and Alexandria, and west to Libya. It also shares much in common with sites from the Fayum, where religion and desert traffic formed the base of late Roman economy in Egypt.<sup>14</sup> Although no desert surveys have apparently taken place to the immediate west of Kom el-Ahmar, extensive investigations are currently underway in the oases to the northwest.<sup>15</sup> It seems fairly likely that additional surveys between Middle Egypt and the Oases might reveal an extensive desert road system, perhaps a southern extension of the Darb al Ahmar. Such road systems would aid in clarifying the tantalizing evidence from earlier periods at Kom el-Ahmar, which also amply long-distance trade. Hence, this survey has clarified that the an influx of imports and prosperity affected not only the provincial capital at Hermopolis Magna, but reached outlying communities such as Kom el-Ahmar during Late Roman and Byzantine times in the Hermopolite Nome. In addition, the survey's findings underscore the value in looking for new sites: local complexity and variation allowed the countryside to develop its own intricate history, and additional desert trading entrepôts likely await discovery.

#### NOTES

- 1 S. Parcak, "Satellites and Survey in Middle Egypt," *Egyptian Archaeology* 29 (2005): 28–32
- 2 W. M. F. Petrie, *Tell el Amarna* (London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1894).
- 3 See Survey and Excavation Projects in Egypt, East Delta, South Sinai, "Tell Tebilla 09: The Material Culture," <http://www.deltasinai.com/delta-09.htm> (accessed 26 November 2011).
- 4 An exact parallel is illustrated in J. Riley, "The Coarse Pottery from Benghazi," in J. Lloyd (ed.), *Excavations at Sidi Khrebish, Benghazi (Berenice) II*, Supplements to

Libya Antiqua 5 (Tripoli: Department of Antiquities, 1979), 131–133, pl. 70:41.

- 5 See P. French, "Late Dynastic Pottery," in B. Kemp (ed.), *Amarna Reports III* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1986), 161, fig. 9.7.

- 6 D. Aston, *Egyptian Pottery of the Late New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period (Twelfth–Seventh Centuries BC)*, Studien zur Archäologie und Geschichte Altägyptens 13, (Heidelberg: Heidelberg Orientverlag, 1996), 5.

- <sup>7</sup> See C. Hope, “Kegs and Flasks from the Dakleh Oasis,” *Cahiers de la céramique égyptienne* 5 (2000): 189–234, fig. 2.
- <sup>8</sup> For parallels see D. Bailey, *Excavations at El-Asbmunein V: Pottery Lamps and Glass of the Late Roman and Early Arab Periods* (London: British Museum Press, 1998), pl. 2, A65–66, A 75, A88–90), and J. Hayes, *Late Roman Pottery* (London: British School at Rome, 1972), fig. 23 83/1 (forms 131–132 from Abu Mina).
- <sup>9</sup> See Bailey, pl. 5:177; Hayes, fig. 13:14–18, form 62 or 52.
- <sup>10</sup> See Bailey, pl. 5:A192; Hayes, fig. 24:2, form 86.
- <sup>11</sup> K. Butzer, *Early Hydraulic Civilization in Egypt: A Study in Cultural Ecology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).
- <sup>12</sup> A. Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire AD 284–430* (London: Frontera Press, 1993), 74.
- <sup>13</sup> S. Clackson, *Coptic and Greek Texts relating to the Hermopolite Monastery of Apa Apollo* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 2000), 103.
- <sup>14</sup> R. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 138.
- <sup>15</sup> S. Ikram and C. Rossi, “Surveying the North Kharga Oasis,” *Kmt* 13.4 (2002): 72–79.
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