

CyberScribe 168 - August 2009

Well, the CyberScribe just got back from a month in Egypt, assisting with the excavations run by Dr. Donald Redford at the ancient delta city of Mendes. Aside from an encounter with a cobra, astonishing heat and humidity...and an incident that nearly cost me an ear...it was great fun!

The siren call of the Newsletter Editor forced me to get busy and write up another CyberScribe column, so here we go. (Actually, she threatened me with a fate worse than...well...something or other).

For the first offering, the CyberScribe wants to shout for joy. The long-closed tomb of the Pharaoh Horemheb in the Valley of the Kings has at last been reopened to visitors. The CyberScribe has only been inside once, and that was in the late 1970's. The NT-ARCE Winter Egypt Tour will be going to this wonderful site. Here is the brief announcement. (<http://snipurl.com/pdf15>).

“Minister of Culture, Farouk Hosni, announced today that the tomb of Horemhab, in the Valley of the King's on Luxor's West Bank, has been reopened following the installation of state-of-the-art equipment to control the rate of humidity within. He added that this tomb is the first to have such technology installed in an attempt to reduce and control the rate of humidity and heat, which has affected the tomb's wall paintings in the past, leading to its original closure.



A scene inside the tomb (Photo: SCA)



[The entrance to the tomb (Photo: SCA)]

“Dr. Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), said that a German organization, specializing in such technology, provided the equipment, following several years of scientific studies, in order to provide a suitable atmosphere in the tomb. A scientific team is now monitoring

the efficiency of the equipment, as if all operates successfully the equipment will be installed in all tombs in the Valley of the Kings.”

Technology makes steady increases and changes in Egyptology, and the following story (edited for space reasons) offers a good look at how the use of GPS studies has opened yet another new means of accurately recording Egyptology field data. Be sure and read the entire article, as it is quite fascinating to see how clever field workers devise their newest tools. (<http://snipurl.com/pdfju>).

“Hundreds of viper trails covered the sand before them. The Egyptologists could only hope that the serpents themselves were long gone as they made their way off the ancient desert road towards the limestone cliffs. First to reach the wall, Dr John Coleman Darnell of Yale University, was surprised to find the surface covered with rough hieroglyphic inscriptions in apparently random patterns. What did they mean?

“His past experience in the field led Darnell to think the markings were graffiti. The wall was close enough to an ancient campsite to serve as the common latrine for drivers, merchants and guards. The inscriptions, over 500 counted so far, were the ancient equivalent of writing on the bathroom wall. Darnell was the first person to see that graffiti in possibly 5000 years.

“Using standard archaeological methods to measure, record and interpret the inscriptions on this wall could be the work of an entire career, by itself. But Professor Darnell’s plan wasn’t to use conventional techniques in this survey. His team was packing a technological edge that would make quick work of this fascinating new find.

“The varied terrain includes shifting sand dunes in the Great Sand Sea that can reach hundreds of meters high, and vast, featureless plains of rock and stony plateaus, some reaching 2000 meters. Although easy to lose yourself in the vastness of the Western Desert, modern satellite imaging and mobile GPS locators mean it is very unlikely to stray completely off ‘mapped’ terrain. However, Professor Darnell says the archaeological map for the region is still quite bare.

“A few archaeological expeditions have turned up finds that cannot be placed in the historical record because of unclear record keeping. On the other hand, searching through even the most meticulous of records can be a daunting project.

“Lost sites have been rediscovered years later, most recently the King Menkauhor pyramid, relocated after 166 years (German archaeologist Karl Richard Lepsius’ reported discovery in 1842 went unconfirmed.) Darnell was hoping industrial GPS technology could help speed up the process and accuracy of their work.

“One logical concern was the learning curve. The professors and their graduate students needed to be able to use the equipment with limited support in the field, as they are the ones who have spent the majority of their lives learning about former cultures and ‘dead’ languages. They’re not professional engineers or surveyors, however their fieldwork does require a specialized understanding of surveying techniques.

“In the event, the team went into the field with a Topcon GPT-2005 reflectorless total station. Professors and students underwent training essential to prepare the group for their upcoming expedition.

“With the total station, Darnell’s team could place-capture potshards almost instantly. There was no more need for the meticulous record keeping on-site, with GPS technology, a simple point-and-shoot process replaced an immense record keeping apparatus and allowed the Egyptologists to get results very quickly.

“They also used the total station to situate the ancient graffiti site – which they named Kom Hefaw, meaning ‘mound of serpents’ – and the specific inscriptions at the sites (over 500 inscriptions so far).

“On the ground, the difference was obvious immediately. At Tudenab, the team located an ancient deep well and could produce a 3D digital plan of it practically on-site. The well was not a complex project, but they had another surprise coming. After assembling their data from the Ghueita Temple site, they were able to generate a 3D model of the temple that could be examined from any angle, whilst sitting in a hotel room in Cairo.

“‘We were really surprised,’ said Darnell. ‘We knew it was possible to use the software that way but really never imagined it would be so easy. In the models, you can “walk” right through the building and see the placements of all the major architectural elements. It’s really impressive.’

“In the future, Darnell hopes that the GPS technology will continue to help us understand our past and, in so doing, better understand ourselves.”

Senet is one of those wonderfully ancient games that remains very playable today. If you have not yet experienced Senet, the article below may be a great joy for you. It explains the game, tells how to play, and offers on-line places to enjoy a game played by the Pharaohs. The Guardian's site (<http://snipurl.com/pdg7t>) offers hours of fun!



“The ancient Egyptian Senet (snt in hieroglyphs, which means “passing”) is a game for two players, requiring a board with 3 rows of 10 squares each – sort of like a checkerboard cut off short. Each player tries to be the first to send his or her little “men” around all 30 squares and off the board. This is rather like the point of Parcheesi. The second – or last – across and off the board is not just a rotten egg, as we say in English, but doomed! Egyptians took this game very seriously indeed.

“Players each get 5 “men” (although originally they got 7). To be able to tell them apart, these playing pieces need to be different colors, theoretically black and white. However, the version the Word Geek purchased was made of wood and the “white” ones are not painted at all, which makes them a pale, woody color. The “black” ones are painted green. The Egyptians couldn’t distinguish between blue and green with their ancient language but they definitely had a separate word for “black,” a word they used to describe their own country, kmt, namely, “the black land.” The “great green,” on the other hand, was the Mediterranean Sea, not a land at all.

“Anyway, there is a set path for these little “men,” half of which resemble the nondescript pawns of the average chess game and half of which are more like the castles but minus crenellation. They must go from top left, down 10 squares, then up the middle row of 10 squares, and then back down the 3rd row of 10 squares. This sort of back and forth path, when applied to reading or writing ancient texts, is called boustrophedon, from the Greek description of how the ox plows.

“These playing pieces (and the human players) hope that they are heading to the Egyptian version of Paradise, unification with the sun, Mr. Ra or Re, because playing Senet is a way of deciding what will happen to the players’ soul (or souls, since people had 2 in those days) in the Land of the Dead. So, stay alert! You wouldn’t want to lose your ka (or ba). Since this game means so much now, everyone should be aware that square number 1 in the upper left hand corner in the House of Thoth. And who was he? He was a deity who looked like a man but had the head of a particular water bird, an ibis, much of the time. At other times, he was ibis all over and perched on a tall stick called a standard, to announce the arrival of a new ghostie in the underworld. The newly deceased needed announcing so the underworld judges could get ready for judging and the underworld monsters could get ready for devouring.”

Now, notes the CyberScribe, the rest of the article is a detailed list of steps and strategies...much too long for this column. But check it out...it’s a lot of fun!



“If you should lose your game of Senet, you may wish to know what your fate will be in the next world. The Word Geek shows you a picture taken from a close-up of an illustration from the Egyptian Book of the Dead in hopes of scaring the living daylights out of you. This is the dreadful beast she referred to

earlier, the one sitting on the stool with his tongue hanging out, part hippo, part lion, sometimes part crocodile, and wearing the long sheep's wool wig of the noble Egyptian, who plans to devour the dwelling of your soul which is your heart. Your heart, of course, is the little gadget which resembles a jar in the balance scales behind the bird-headed deity (Mr. Thoth) holding the scribal equipment.

“By the by, on the other side of the balance, we should expect to see a symbol for the goddess of truth, justice, and righteousness, namely Maat and she is usually shown as her hieroglyph, a feather, a way of spelling her name. Instead, the painter of this manuscript apparently forgot that he'd already represented the deceased by the heart and so put the deceased in a second time on the other side of the scale as a little hieroglyphs of the seated man. Whoever this heart plus seated man is, balanced against himself, he's probably going to be gobbled up by the foul, hungry beastie, don't you think?

For more information on Senet and some other ancient Egyptian games, with plenty of pictures of old sets, including Tut's:

<http://www.gamesmuseum.uwaterloo.ca/Archives/Piccione/index.html>

To play Senet online, two slightly differing versions are available:

www.ancientegypt.co.uk/life/activity/act_main.html

www.clevelandart.org/kids/egypt/senet.html

To read about Senet in Spanish, and to see some pictures:

www.egiptologia.com/arte/104-obras-en-detalle-1306-el-raton-y-el-gato.html

There are some downloads available for those who do NOT have a 64 bit processor, including Senet, Mehen, and some other ancient games:

www.gustavianum.uu.se/vm/downloads.php?lang=en (this is the Victoria museum)”

The CyberScribe has long been fascinated by those wonderful tourist boats of days gone by, the dahabeya...that large Egyptian yacht chartered by rich tourists for a leisurely trip to Abu Simbel and back. Alas, they are now almost all gone...abandoned///sunken and rotted away. But not all of them are gone. A few still carry tourists, and one carries one of the more famous Egyptologists and his wife. Kent Weeks acquired his own antique dahabeya and lives on the boat, in imitation of days long past. The article (abbreviated) in the New York

Times (<http://snipurl.com/pdh46>) tells about the Weeks' and their boat, and provides an insight into the past on the Nile.



The "Kingfisher," an 85-foot-long dahabiya, or traditional Nile riverboat, is owned by Dr. Kent Weeks and his wife, Susan. More



The couple lives on the boat in Luxor, Egypt, for about six months of each year while they work on the excavation of a 130-room tomb in the nearby Valley of the Kings.

“Kent Weeks and his wife, Susan Weeks, spend most of their waking hours in a 130-room tomb called KV 5 in the legendary Valley of the Kings, the site of many tombs. And at the end of the workday, they come home to a place only slightly less unusual. The couple lives on a 25-meter-long (85-foot-long) dahabiya, a houseboat moored along the banks of the Nile in this southern Egyptian city of around 400,000, known in ancient times as Thebes. Their closest neighbors are the mummies in the Mummification Museum next door.

““Archaeologists often live on boats because the sites are near the river,” said Dr. Weeks, 67, an Egyptologist. He captured worldwide headlines in 1995 with the announcement that KV 5 had been the burial chamber for the sons of Ramesses II and sprawled deeper into the desert hillside than anyone had suspected.

“The boats, which resemble traditional Arab sailing vessels, became popular more than a century ago when as many as 450 were used for the tourist trade. Only four or five remain from the period and “this handful survived because they had metal hulls,” Dr. Weeks said. “The rest were sunk to get rid of vermin.”

“In 2001, after searching for 10 years, the couple found an iron-hulled boat in Helwan, a Nile town south of Cairo. It was built in 1898 or 1899, they learned.

““The boat was a total wreck,” said Mrs. Weeks, 65. The hull, wooden decking and walls were intact but they had to replace everything else, along with adding a kitchen and bathroom to the layout. “It is an imperfect reconstruction,” Dr. Weeks said. “In the 18th century you would go ashore to eat and to use the bathroom.”

“By the time the work was finished, in 2003, the boat had about 84 square meters (900 square feet) of living space spread over two levels, as well as conveniences like a bathtub, a washing machine, a generator and water pump. The boat is called “Kingfisher,” in honor of the couple’s favorite bird. The cost of buying and restoring the boat came to 250,000 Egyptian pounds (\$50,000). The project was so unusual that there are no comparative prices readily available, although Dr. Weeks said he believes it could be sold now for about six times the sum they originally paid.



“The white-walled cabin contains four bedrooms as well as the kitchen and bathroom. All the plumbing uses filtered water from the Nile. “If you fill up the bathtub, the water is pretty brown,” Mrs. Weeks said. At the end of the central corridor is the master bedroom, which has a raised platform for a bed, and storage space below. “Because the bed lies so far aft that the sides of the boat curve upwards, raising the bed makes more efficient use of space,” Dr. Weeks said.



“The couple occasionally takes the boat out for special trips, especially to raise money for the Theban Mapping Project, an effort they began in 1978 to create a comprehensive archaeological database of the ancient city. Dr. Weeks is the project director; Mrs. Weeks, its artist.

““If we need to convince someone to donate money then we might take them for lunch down the Nile,” Dr. Weeks said. The couple also plays host to benefit tours operated by Seven Wonders Travel and Ancient World Tours.

“Mr. and Mrs. Weeks say there are many advantages to living on the “Kingfisher,” including frequent bird-watching trips to remote islands. Still, there is a downside. “Sometimes there is a lot of tour-boat traffic,” Dr. Weeks said. “The captains toot their horns and it is just like being on a freeway in Southern California.”

“But, he added, “We do interesting things — living on a boat, working in a tomb. Every day we see the sun come up and the sun go down. What more could you ask for?””

The next piece is a sort of ‘mea culpa’ tale of regrets for the actions of past ancestors...the early explorers who left their names and other graffiti on the

great sites of Egypt. Philippa McDonnell found herself face to face with the evidence of ancestral wrongdoing...and got some forgiveness. Read on from a short bit found in the 'Guardian' (<http://snipurl.com/pdi44>).



Philippa McDonnell with the great-great-great uncle's graffiti

“I have been worried by the behavior of my great-great-great-grandfather. I had always known that the 2nd Earl of Belmore went to Egypt and "rescued" – as they termed it then – some famous antiquities. What I didn't know was that before sending them to museums, he defaced them.

“Go to the Metropolitan Museum in New York and you'll see the name BELMORE inscribed in 3in-high Roman capitals on the side of the Temple of Dendar. As graffiti goes, it is beautifully carved. But then, so is the temple.

“Apparently he had mounting debts when, in 1813, he decided to flee the bailiffs by touring Egypt. He bought an 86ft schooner and spent £9,600 transforming it. He took his family and assorted others along, including the Countess Juliana, Rosa the lapdog, the family doctor and the vicar.

“I went to Egypt this spring to see whether there was any legacy. First stop, the Great Pyramid. And, dear oh dear, there at the summit, BELMORE. Thankfully he appears to have made no attempt to ship the Great Pyramid back to Britain.

“At Luxor we visited the stunning temple of Medinet Habu, largely built 3,300 years ago. We found a later hieroglyphic on a pillar: AL CORRY, 1818 – my great-great-great uncle and Belmore's captain on the voyage.

“Next stop was the Ramesseum, the mortuary temple of Ramses II. And there they were again. Feeling rather ashamed, I admitted my connection to an official guide at Djebel Silsileh.

““You should be proud,” he said. “Modern graffiti we cannot stand, but Lord Belmore and his contemporaries helped discover our heritage. Now they are part of it.””

And lastly, if you should ever be fortunate enough to invent a time travel machine, you can calibrate it so that you can be there for the moment in time when construction was begun on the Great Pyramid of Khufu...or not.

An article in ‘Rianovosti’ (<http://snipurl.com/pdiga>), claims that ‘researchers’ have determined this actual moment in time. Read on:

“A group of Egyptian researchers claims to have hit on an exact date for the construction of Khufu's pyramid, the largest of the three Great Pyramids at Giza. The team, led by Dr. Abdel-Halim Nureddin, says work on the pyramid was started on 23 August, 2470 BC. The local governor told reporters that the date will now be celebrated as National Giza Day.

“Nureddin said the team had proved the date using “historical facts and astronomical calculations.”

“The claim was immediately dismissed by the country's leading Egyptologist, Dr. Zahi Hawass, along with Kamal Wahid, general director of the Giza necropolis, who said the year can only be approximated.

“They did not comment on why the “exact” date found by the research team for the start of construction appeared to be almost a century later than the approximate date for the pyramid's completion accepted by most Egyptologists - 2560 BC. However, Giza Governor Sayyed Abdel Aziz said Khufu's pyramid will now become a symbol for the province, and will feature on its emblem.

“Egyptologists generally avoid putting precise Gregorian Calendar dates on events in the country's Pharaonic past, due to the different way in which the ancient calendar worked. Egyptians counted years from the inauguration of each pharaoh, meaning that with each new king the calendar would be reset to zero. As no single document exists listing all the pharaohs from first to last, and due to the breaks in the record when the land was disunited (the intermediate periods), most dates can only be approximated to the nearest decade, or several decades.

“The Great Pyramid of Khufu (also known by the Greek version of his name, Cheops), is one of three colossal pyramids built by successive Old Kingdom pharaohs, at a time when the country was at the peak of its power, and intensely centralized, giving the rulers a level of control not enjoyed by those of later periods.”

Well, that's enough. This month was a little short on worthwhile Egyptology news, but we'll see if September is better.

See you next month!

If you would like to contact the CyberScribe (also known as Clair Ossian) to ask a question or to suggest an item for a future column, please send an e-mail to clastic@verizon.net or call (972) 416-5211. Don't forget to look up the North Texas Chapter of ARCE's Internet Homepage located at this address: <http://www.arce-ntexas.org/>.

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