

Excavations at Semna South, Sudan

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During the 1966/67 and 1967/68 seasons the Oriental Institute Expedition to Sudanese Nubia excavated a Middle Kingdom pharaonic fortress and an adjacent cemetery at Semna South, fifty miles south of Wadi Halfa.

Less than a mile from the greater fortress of Semna West, with which it seems to have been connected by means of a wall or walls, the fort at Semna South is built on flat ground and on a square plan. Its fortifications consist of a large stone glacis, a ditch, and then a buttressed girdle wall separated from the ditch by a wide berm. The area enclosed within the girdle wall is quite small, some 35 meters square.

A stairway of massive stones, its upper part protected on each side by stone masonry, descends from the northwest corner of the inner area of the fort and tunnels under the glacis to what was originally the water's edge.

At the base of the northern glacis, silt had accumulated to a height of several meters, indicating that the Nile level rose subsequent to the building of the fortress. The effect of this higher Nile level was also observed within the excavated part of the ditch, where, in the accumulated silt, sherds of Middle Kingdom pottery were found. Although this higher Nile level may well have been a local phenomenon, it may also necessitate a re-examination of the Nile levels throughout the Middle Kingdom.

The course of a reveted bank which connects the south corner of the fort with a nearby hill terrace has been established. The apparent lowness of this wall and its relatively weak construction would indicate that the wall was not meant for defensive purposes. These characteristics of the wall, together with traces of temporary human habitation within the area enclosed by the wall and the southern glacis of the fort, would rather indicate that the area so enclosed—an annex, as it were, to the fort of Semna South—may have served as a depot, a commercial exchange base, or a temporary human settlement or camp. This complex

character of Semna South, that is, fort proper with annex, or possibly annexes, will need to be kept in mind when evaluating its function in the system of Second Cataract fortifications.

A large dump outside the fort on the northwest proved to consist of purely Egyptian Middle Kingdom materials. Of greatest interest among the discarded objects was an unexpectedly large quantity of stamp seal impressions, official and private, decorated and inscribed. Among them were impressions of the hitherto only partially known name of the fortress itself. In a well known papyrus of the Middle Kingdom found near the Ramesseum at Thebes there is a list of 14 Egyptian fortresses between the First and Second Cataracts. The name of the southernmost of seven in the region of the Second Cataract is incomplete because the papyrus breaks off after the beginning. The seal impressions now complete the name: "The Subduer of the Setiu-Nubians." A similar dump outside the fortress of Serra East also yielded seal impressions for the Institute's excavators in 1963/64 and established the name of that fortress, "The Repeller of the Medjay-Nubians," which although fully preserved in the same Ramesseum papyrus was not unambiguously identifiable with Serra East.

The excavation of the cemetery at Semna South established the predominance of Meroitic graves but also revealed—as is frequently the case in Nubian cemeteries—that within the same area graves belonging to the X-group and, to a smaller extent, to the Christian period are present.

In spite of the fact that the cemetery had been plundered in both ancient and modern times, the funerary gifts recovered from the graves, the lay-out of the mastaba-type tombs, and the presence of foreign imports and their imitations give the impression that the Meroitic community at Semna South was not only large in number but that it had a standard of living which favorably compared with other Meroitic communities in the region of the Second Cataract and that it maintained trade relations with Greco-Roman Egypt.