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Excavations in Petrie's camp in Dendera

Archaeology and excavations go hand in hand. The object of knowledge that both pursue are the material remains of past societies. But the practice of excavation can also become a subject of exploration itself. Sylvain Dhennin takes a look at Petrie's camp at Dendera.

W. M. F. Petrie carried out a single excavation campaign at Dendera, in 1897–98, for the Egypt Exploration Fund. During this campaign, he focused particularly on the human necropolis and the animal catacombs, both located in the southern part of the site. The published volume of his excavations (*Denderah*, EEF [EES] Excavation Memoir 17) provides little insight to the context in which this campaign was organised. It details the composition of the team, which included his wife Hilda Petrie and several of his students, among them Arthur C. Mace and Norman de Garis Davies, but he gives no indication of the practical organisation and management of the campaign.

Petrie's autobiography, published in 1931, states that work at Dendera began on 20

December 1897, with the cleaning of the animal catacombs 'to gain room for our men'. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that he set up camp close to this spot. The resumption of archaeological work on the catacombs by a CNRS-HiSoMA team of the French archaeological mission of Dendera (IFAO, led by Pierre Zignani) was occasion to excavate this camp and an opportunity to explore Petrie's working conditions in Dendera at the end of the 19th century.

Discovery and identification of the camp

A first visit to the south-western area of Dendera in 2018 revealed a set of three walls, of undetermined function, but whose antiquity was not obvious. During a search of the Philadelphia archives, Yann Tristant (Macquarie

University) identified this building, based on its characteristic shape, as the base camp of Petrie's excavations. It appears on the site map drawn by Petrie, unlike the published version. The map kept in Philadelphia combines Petrie's excavations for the EEF and C. E. Rosher's excavations for the American Exploration Society for the same period 1897–98. The Temple of Hathor and the human cemetery are detailed, as well as the animal necropolis and the camp, although no details of the catacombs are given. There is also a drawing of the general view of the site from the catacombs, showing the cemetery, the temple, and the gate of the eastern sanctuary up to the River Nile.

The building sits on the trail of a *wadi* running approximately north to south. The identification on Petrie's map and the outcrop of the structure made us open a limited excavation trench within the grounds of the structure. Facing east, it probably provided a direct view of the animal necropolis and the human cemetery beyond, before the piles of rubble came to obstruct the sight lines. It was also set up to face away from the strong winds. It has suffered much damage and is preserved only to a height of some tens of centimetres – not greatly surprising as most of it would have been constructed from perishable materials such as wood or tent fabrics.

The architecture of the camp

The preserved part of the structure mainly consists of three low, linked walls, built in a similar way: they are about 30 cm wide and

rather irregular, composed of large flint pebbles (up to 20–25 cm long), abundant in the local soil, and fired bricks reused from the ancient structures of the site. Pebbles and bricks are coarsely bonded with mud. The first wall follows an approximate east-west orientation and forms the southern end of the building. It is 3.90 m long and reaches a maximum height of 40 cm. The second wall, the back of the building and perpendicular to the first, is 24.40 m long, running roughly north to south and preserved to a maximum height of 60 cm. The third wall, to the north, is parallel to the first one, but 70 cm shorter. However, it is preserved along its entire length, the 'missing' part being the building's entrance door. Petrie's map shows a row of 9 huts immediately to the east of the masonry structure. According to his drawings, these huts were rectangular and of various sizes. A large tent (about 4 by 4 m) accompanied the huts, at the same orientation.

The three walls were the only solidly built elements of the structure and hence the sole surviving part. Of the row of huts, only a few negative traces remain. The stratigraphy consists only of an abandonment layer of soft black soil, present across the entire surface of the inner structure. It covers an indurated circulation level of compacted sand, corresponding to the surface of the natural soil (composed of a mixture of sand and large flints). The only traces of occupation were detected in the north-west corner of the building, where remains of a fireplace are preserved. The floor around this fireplace



Left to right:

1. General view of the camp, before excavations.
2. General view of the catacombs.
3. The main corridor of the catacombs, used as barracks for the Egyptian workers.



and towards the outside of the structure is slightly raised and blackened by the ash discharge.

Small finds from inside the camp

Despite the few archaeological layers preserved, the material discovered in the abandonment layer was abundant and varied. It is composed of objects used by Petrie's team during his mission and of fragmentary ancient material left on site after excavation.

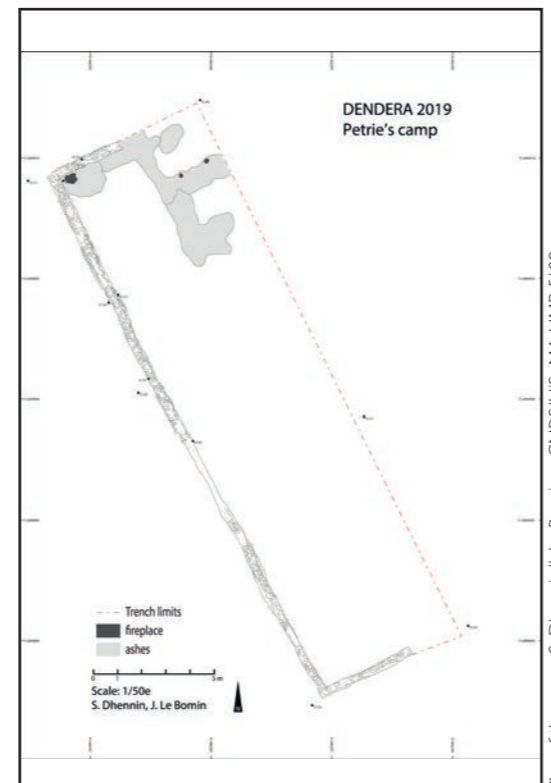
The fragments of modern material discovered reflect the everyday objects used by the team: we found several corks of various sizes. Two of them bear the oval stamps of the French mineral water brand Badoit, a third one a rectangular stamp of four lines: '(1) [...]GREE[...] (2) O.V.[M] (3) D HIGHLAND [...] (4) [G?] LAS[G?]', probably indicating Scotch 'old vatted malt' whisky, the fourth one a stamp showing only the number '163'.

Two lead sheets that belonged to bottles were also discovered. One is decorated with alternating black and cream-coloured stripes, the other bears an oval stamp with the name '[...]Southwell (?) [regi]stered Trade Mark', but the reading is difficult and uncertain.

Metal objects have also been found, nails of several modules, fragments of rectangular strips with several holes, can keys, a fragment of aluminium foil and a multi-function knife



All photos: S. Dhennin – CNRS/HiSoMA UMR 5189



Top: detailed view of Petrie's camp.

Centre: the camp fireplace.

Bottom: view of the camp during the excavations.

Limestone fragment bearing the title 'smr w'tj' ('sole companion').



Limestone fragment depicting a cow.



with a corkscrew, bottle opener, small and large blade (image on the following page). Several bullet casings and a lead bullet have also been discovered as well as a 2-piaster coin dated 1293 AH (1875 CE).

Five glass bottles were found under the arch of the door in Gallery 6 of the animal catacombs: three light green glass bottles of Badoit water, two of which can be identified by the remains of their labels. These labels appear from 1874 onwards and were meant to prevent counterfeiting, but also to create a brand identity. The labels discovered in Dendera bear remnants of the brand slogan, 'Table water without rival', and an advertising text extolling the qualities of the water, helping to restore stomach functions, along with a list of the international prizes and competitions won by Badoit water, at the 1878 World Exhibition or in Frankfurt in 1881 – a common feature in advertising strategies of the period (image on the following page). Two more bottles complete this set: a glass bottle of a darker green and different shape; and a transparent glass bottle, closed with a cork and still bearing some traces of the label (two letters only).

Another group of objects found inside Petrie's camp derives from discarded fragments discovered during his own excavations. They seem to come mainly from the human necropolis and the animal catacombs in the camp's vicinity.

A group of about 40 limestone fragments with decorations or inscriptions belongs to different monuments of the human necropolis. Their style places them at the end of the First Intermediate Period or the beginning of the Middle Kingdom (c. 2050 BCE). These are fragments of offering tables and stelae bearing only a few traces of decoration or text, such as the title 'smr w'tj' ('sole companion'), various hieroglyphs or animal figures (images left).

Also noteworthy are two fragments of ceramics originally from the animal catacombs, which seem to have been brought back to the camp because they bore a date inscribed in Greek (month of Pakhons) (image left). There were also Two ostraca – one demotic, one Coptic. The rest of the material consisted of beads, small fragments of cartonnage and ceramics from various periods.

In summary, Petrie's camp at Dendera has left relatively sparse traces. Nevertheless, the

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Above: fragment of a jar with a Greek inscription of the month of Pakhons.

Left: plan of the camp.



Bottle of Badoit water with fragments of the label.



Multi-function pocket knife with corkscrew.



All photos: S. Dhennin – CNRS/HiSoMA UMR 5189

excavation of the premises gives us a first picture of the living conditions on the site. The construction is crude, as is the material discovered. The camp having probably been cleared before (or at the latest, just after) the end of the excavations, most of the objects were removed, the construction materials for the huts were probably collected and given away. Initial observations in the animal catacombs show that – similar to the camp – only a few traces of the barracks of Petrie’s excavation team remain, except for a few objects abandoned nearby.

• Sylvain Dhennin is based in Lyon at the CNRS (HiSoMA lab, Maison de l’Orient). I am grateful to Joachim Le Bomin (archaeologist) and Stéphanie Porcier (archeozoologist) for their work in the field. I also thank Pierre Zignani, director of the mission, the IFAO and the inspectorate of Qena for their kind support.

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