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Tell el-Herr

Catherine Defernez

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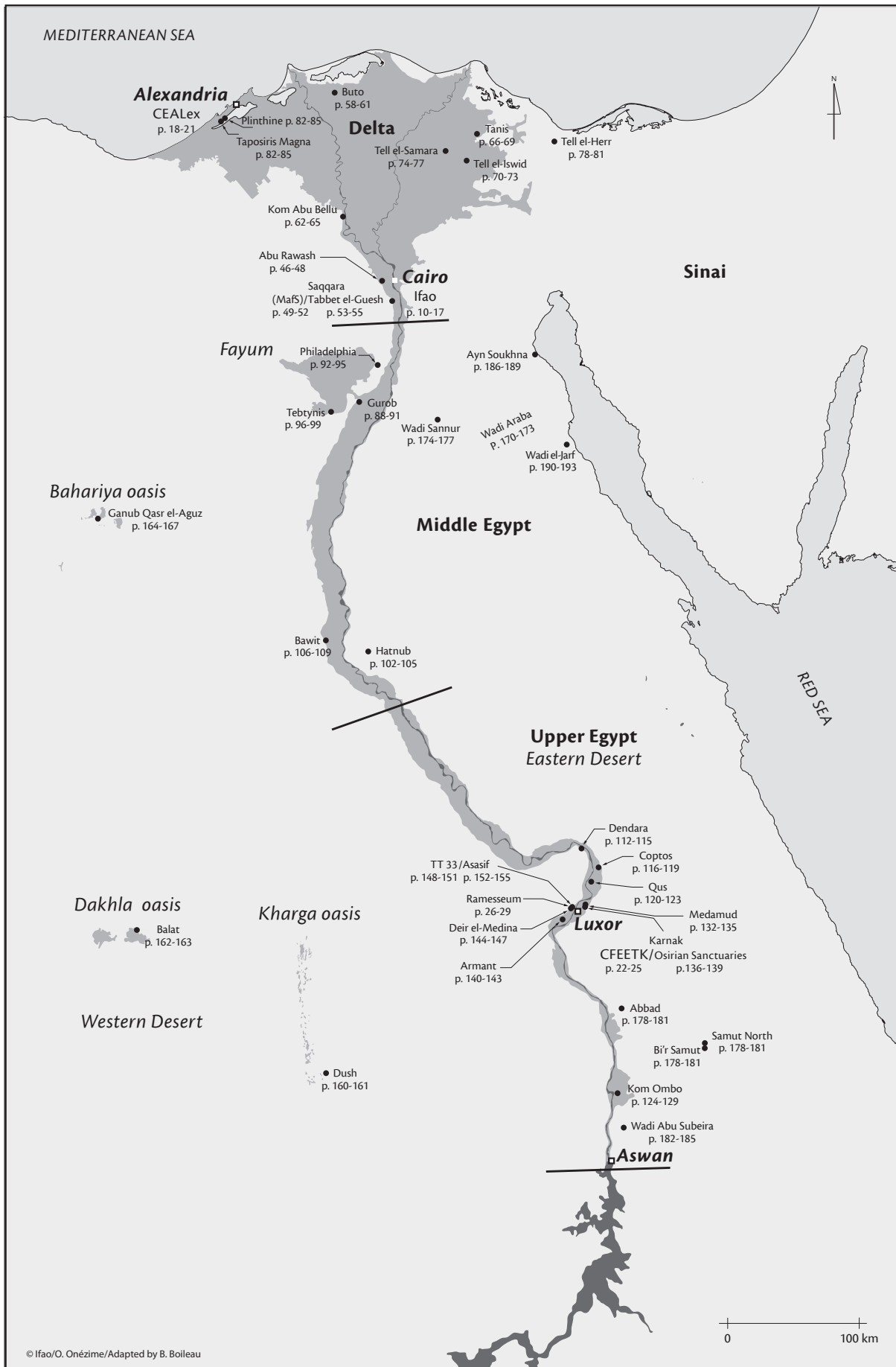
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FRENCH
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Summary

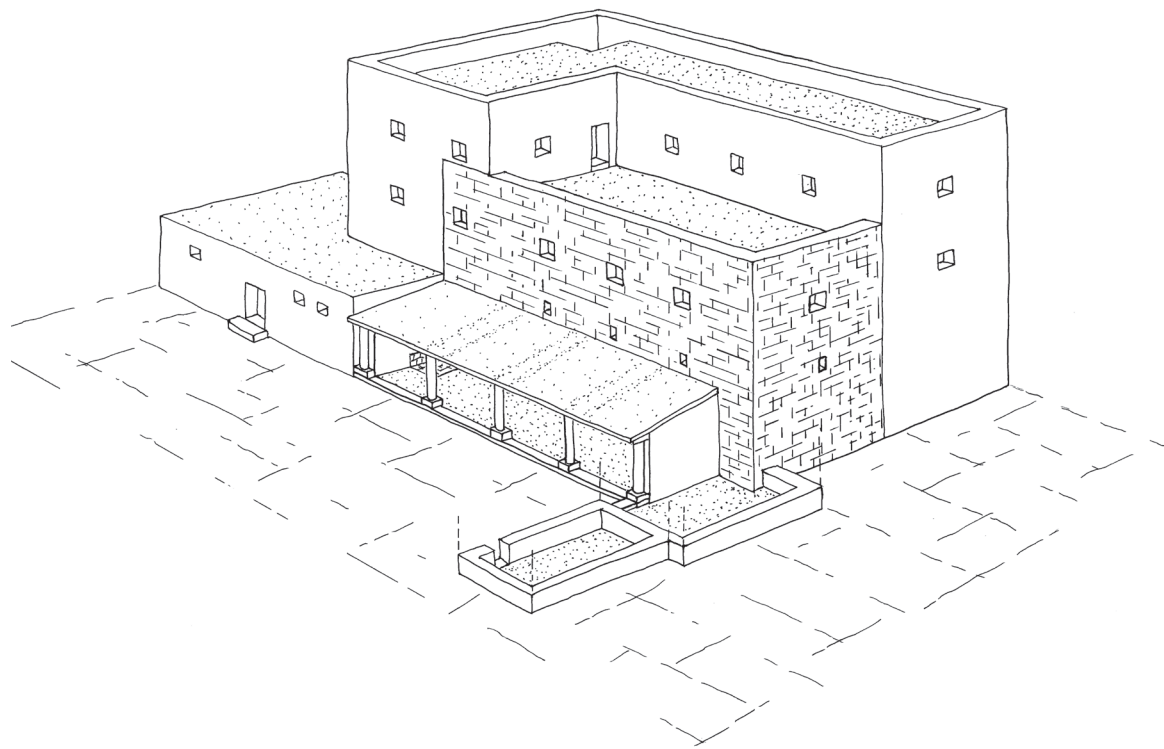
Maps	v
Foreword	ix
Preface	xi
Chronological table	xii
THE MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS IN FRENCH ARCHAEOLOGY IN EGYPT	1
The Institutional Framework and Franco-Egyptian Cooperation in Archaeology	2
The French Institute for Oriental Archaeology (IFAO)	10
The Centre for Alexandrian Studies (CEAlex)	18
The Franco-Egyptian Centre for the Study of the Temples of Karnak (CFEETK)	22
The French Archaeological Mission of Thebes-West (MAFTO) and the Ramesseum	26
The Louvre Museum	30
The French Research Institute for Development (IRD)	34
The French National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research (INRAP)	36
Sponsorship	38
OVERVIEW OF FRENCH ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSIONS IN EGYPT	43
CAIRO AND ITS SURROUNDINGS	45
Abu Rawash, Early Dynastic Cemetery M	46
Saqqara (MafS)	49
Tabbet el-Guesh	53
THE DELTA AND THE NORTHERN MARGINS	57
Buto (Tell el-Fara'in)	58
Kom Abu Bellu	62
Tanis (Tell San el-Hagar)	66
Tell el-Iswid	70
Tell el-Samara	74
Tell el-Herr	78
Taposiris Magna and Plinthine (Abusir and Kom el-Nogus)	82
THE FAYUM	87
Gurob	88
Philadelphia (Kom el-Kharaba el-Kabir Girza)	92
Tebtynis (Umm-el-Breigât)	96
MIDDLE EGYPT	101
Hatnub	102
Bawit	106

UPPER EGYPT	111
Dendara	112
Coptos (Qift/Quft)	116
Qus	120
Kom Ombo	124
THE THEBAN REGION	131
Medamud	132
Karnak, Osirian Sanctuaries	136
Armant	140
Deir el-Medina	144
Tomb of Padiamenope (TT 33)	148
Asasif	152
THE WESTERN DESERT	157
The Western Oases: Introduction	158
Dush (Kharga Oasis)	160
Balat (Dakhla Oasis)	162
Ganub Qasr el-Aguz (Bahariya Oasis)	164
THE EASTERN DESERT AND THE RED SEA COAST	169
Wadi Araba	170
Wadi Sannur	174
The Eastern Desert: Samut North, Bi'r Samut and Abbad	178
Wadi Abu Subeira	182
Ayn Soukhna	186
Wadi el-Jarf	190
APPENDIXES	195
Site Directors, collaborators, partner institutions and sponsors	197
Bibliography	209

Tell el-Herr

Situated some kilometres from the Sinai coastal strip, Tell el-Herr is a frontier-post which was constructed during the first Persian domination (the Achaemenid 27th Dynasty). Its foundation had two purposes: military and economic. The unusual character of the investigated remains and the rich, varied documentation which this kom has generated during more than two decades of excavation, make it a unique and significant site in the history of the end of the Late Period.





1. Aerial view of the Tell during Spring 2010.
© Franco-Egyptian Mission to Tell el-Herr/
J.-F. Gout.

2. Reconstruction of the Tell el-Herr palace
complex. © Franco-Egyptian Mission to Tell
el-Herr/G. Nogara.

It was from 1986, under the co-directorship of Dominique Valbelle and Dr. Mohammed Abd el-Maksoud, that the Franco-Egyptian mission began its activities at the site of Tell el-Herr as part of the framework of the North Sinai Agricultural Development Project (NSADP). The aim of this programme was to aid the development of land for agriculture and irrigation in the region and the construction of the canal of peace (El-Salam canal) linking the current town of El-Arish with the Nile Delta. More extensive activities were conducted in 1992 in the lower Pelusiac region under the aegis of UNESCO and the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (the archaeological rescue project of North-Sinai). With its significant geographic position near the Mediterranean coast, the Pelusian branch of the Nile and the overland route linking Egypt to Palestine (the “Ways of Horus”), from the beginning of its history, the region had featured a network of forts created to protect the most easterly frontier of the Delta from incursions from the East. A succession of frontier-posts was therefore progressively constructed along the coastal strip, on the edge of brackish lagoons formed during the first phase of the Holocene glacial retreat, close to the town of Qantara (in particular Tell Hebua and Tell el-Borg); and during a second phase, more to the east, not far from the ancient city of Peluse. During the 1st millennium BC garrisons at Tell el-Ghaba, Kedu/T.21 and Tell el-Herr were established, one after the other.

Situated 35 km to the east of the Suez Canal, near the modern-day village of Gilbana, the site of Tell el-Herr functioned above all as a frontier-post (*Migdol/Magdolum*) which was constructed during the first half of the 5th century BC, during the Achaemenid 27th Dynasty. The investigations conducted by the Franco-Egyptian mission at the site in 1986 (from the start of the NSADP), revealed several successive fortresses which included imposing mud-brick buildings built during the course of the 4th and 5th centuries BC.



3. Hypogeum construction of the first half of the 5th century BC, north-east corner of the Tell. © Franco-Egyptian Mission to Tell el-Herr.



4. Persian rider in terracotta.
© Franco-Egyptian Mission to Tell el-Herr/J.-F. Gout.



5. Amphorae deposit from the middle of the 5th century BC. © Franco-Egyptian Mission to Tell el-Herr.

The first stepped enclosure, which formed a quadrilateral with sides about 140 m long, was probably constructed at the beginning of the 5th century BC. This was partially cleared on its eastern periphery during the first seasons of excavation. Also cleared were residential areas, temples with an atypical plan (axial niches and central altar) and huge, contemporaneous storage facilities whose cellars could contain dozens of wine and oil amphorae (these were unearthed in areas which had been particularly subject to destruction by recent military occupation). Entirely constructed of cylindrical bricks, a second, enlarged fortress, (with sides measuring 200 m) succeeded it in the last decades of the 5th century BC. This experienced several enlargements in the 4th century BC, and incorporated several blocks of dwellings accessed through a regular network of streets, cultic spaces as well as imposing buildings with a religious or administrative nature built on a cellular platform-foundation. At the north-west corner, a palatial-type of structure, with atypical, Near-Eastern, architectural characteristics, was accessed through a porticoed court which led to a long ceremonial room with annexes, as well as to a series of magazines.

In 2010, just before the temporary cessation of field work, the clearing and study of the main entrance to the Persian fortress at the east of the tell led to the discovery of a hypogeum structure, circular in shape, made of mud-bricks, covered by a dome and accessed by a long set of stairs reaching to a height of 5 m. Contemporary with the foundation of the fortress in the second quarter of the 5th century BC, this structure strongly resembles the Macedonian type of *tholoi*. This apparently had been looted when the construction of the second enclosure wall partly sealed it.

Besides the remains of the Persian period, a necropolis, bath and a huge settlement were unearthed below the tell which date to the Ptolemaic period and cover about fifteen hectares, as well as a Roman fort of the Late Empire on top of it.

Due to its strategic position, being connected closely to maritime and fluvial networks, the site of Tell el-Herr, from its foundation, had apparently played a double role: military and economic. The abundant data gathered through the clearance of different areas of the tell, suggest intense economic and commercial activity between the lower Pelusiac region and major centres of the eastern Mediterranean basin. The variety of artefacts (jewellery, amulets, lithic implements, clay figurines, weapons etc.) and ceramic items attest to the diversity of material culture at this site that was Greek, Phoenician, Persian, Egyptian and Cypriot.

Due to the insecure situation which has prevailed in northern Sinai since 2011, fieldwork excavations have temporarily been suspended. The mission therefore is concentrating its efforts on preparing the publication of an important phase of the site's history relating to the end of the 5th and the 4th century BC. Since 2016 its aim has been to conduct a study of the archaeological material today stored in Egyptian Antiquities' magazines in the town of San el-Hagar.

Within the framework of the mission's activities, in co-operation with the North-Sinai Inspectorate (MoTA), work at the site of Tell Hebua I, Tell Hebua II and Tell el-Farama has been sustained. During the recent inauguration of the enlargement of the Suez Canal, this collaboration was been highlighted by the joint organisation of three expositions and a monograph.

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