

A Hoard of Votive Bronzes from the Sacred Animal Necropolis at North Saqqara

Dr Paul T. Nicholson, Cardiff University, describes the discovery of a unique hoard of bronzes illustrating the popularity of the sacred animal cults associated with Saqqara, and the painstaking work to conserve and identify them. The project is sponsored by the Egypt Exploration Society.

FROM the 1960s until the time of his death, the late Professor W. B. Emery (1903–1971), was engaged in a quest to locate the tomb of the architect Imhotep. Imhotep was the vizier and overseer of works to King Djoser (2667–2648 BC) of the 3rd Dynasty (2686–2613 BC) and was the person responsible for the construction of Egypt's first pyramid, the Step Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara, near modern Cairo.

Such was Imhotep's reputation as a wise man that his name became a byword for all branches of learning, and some two thousand years after his death he was deified and joined the pantheon of Egyptian gods. He was not, however, the only Egyptian god associated with learning. Thoth, who was represented by the sacred ibis and the baboon, was regarded as the deity responsible for the invention of writing and all matters pertaining to learning and literacy. Imhotep was therefore linked with Thoth, and when the Ptolemies took over Egypt (from 332 BC) he was identified with their god of wisdom and of medicine Asklepios (Aesculapius).

Saqqara had a long association with the cults of those animals regarded as the living images

of particular gods. The most famous of these is the Apis Bull, sacred to Ptah, creator-god of Memphis. The Apis was unique, only one animal at a time could represent the god; other deities could be represented by an entire species, such as was the case with the hawk or falcon sacred to Horus and the ibis sacred to Thoth.

Emery reasoned that Imhotep's tomb must lie in an area of other 3rd Dynasty tombs to the north of the Step Pyramid, quite probably in an area where there were deposits of votive pottery from the Late Period (747–332 BC) and after, since this might suggest cult activity associated with one of these much earlier tombs. This would be the sort of pattern that might well be expected if Egyptians of later times were coming to Saqqara to make offerings at the tomb of Imhotep.

Emery's excavations revealed, over a period of a decade or so, that this area was part of what is now known as the Sacred Animal Necropolis. He discovered a catacomb for the burials of ibises. The association between Imhotep and Thoth was tantalisingly clear when mummies of ibises were discovered,

some bearing appliqué of Imhotep, others of Thoth. Emery's reasoning that the tomb of Imhotep should be in this area seemed justified, but no tomb was found. Further excavation revealed a catacomb for baboons, one for the mothers of the Apis bull, another for ibises and a catacomb of mummified hawks or falcons.

In the Falcon Catacomb he discovered a cache of bronze temple furniture. This had been removed from a shrine which had stood on the temple terrace, presumably when it became obsolete or when the temple was too crowded with other objects. As the property of the god, it could not be thrown away, and as such had been buried amongst the pottery jars which contained the mummies of the birds themselves in their catacomb.

This, however, was but one of several caches of bronze items discovered during Emery's work. Outside the catacombs, on the temple terrace itself, where once the shrines of the sacred animals had stood, also proved to be the burial place of several caches containing smaller votive objects such as figures of deities, and small tapering buckets known as *situlae*. These objects were given to the gods



Figures 1 and 2. Vessel 314 before and after cleaning and conservation. Photographs by Janice Coyle © Egypt Exploration Society.



Figure 3. The decoration on vessel 314 shown in a preliminary unrolling from the digital images. Photograph by Janice Coyle © Egypt Exploration Society.



Figure 4. Bronze scarab beetle. Photograph by Janice Coyle © Egypt Exploration Society

by worshippers who came to the shrines to receive oracles from the gods: they were given in the hope of a favourable response or as thanksgiving for a good fortune. So popular were the animal cults that quite frequently the shrines must have become overcrowded and had to be cleared.

When Emery died in 1971 the work at the animal necropolis was incomplete, and the elusive tomb of Imhotep remained undiscovered. Professor Martin published the first of the ibis catacombs (the South Ibis), but the remainder had to wait until the 1990s when Professor H.S. Smith and the writer resumed work there in the hope of bringing Emery's work up to date and supplementing it with a modern investigation. In 1995, as part of this work, the area near the entrance to the Falcon Catacomb was re-cleared so that Emery's plan could be checked and if necessary revised. (The British Academy helped to fund Professor Smith's work to bring to final publication the 1968–69 excavations in the Baboon Catacomb.)

The re-clearance led to the discovery of a very large cache of bronze objects, which had been placed in an abandoned and partly collapsed tomb chamber, very close to the stairway leading down to the Falcon Catacomb. These objects, which number over 600, had become badly corroded and had fused together into a large, and extremely heavy, mass.

The mass was carefully removed, and fortunately separated quite readily into three smaller lumps. These were packaged and

stored until a team of conservators from Cardiff University (Ms Siobhan Stevenson and Mr Walter Gneisinger) were able to come out to Saqqara early in 1996 to work on them. They were able to separate the large concretions into their individual objects, and also to begin to clean some of them. It was very quickly apparent that this was not only the largest cache of votives from the Sacred Animal Necropolis, but a particularly interesting one.

It was intended that work continue the following year, but the antiquities magazine in which the bronzes were stored was the subject of an attempted robbery and remained sealed for several years following 1996. The material only became available for study, after the construction of a new storage magazine, in 2003. At this time the writer was asked to resume work on the finds, and the Egypt Exploration Society undertook to fund the work as part of the Society's commitment to the conservation of finds and monuments in Egypt.

A team comprising two conservators (Ms Jennifer Gosling and Ms Panagiota Manti), a photographer (Ms Janice Coyle), an illustrator (Mr James Newbould) a field assistant (Ms Elizabeth Verrinder) and the writer spent three weeks undertaking the recording and conservation of the objects (Figures 1 and 2). We were joined in the field by a conservator from the Egyptian Supreme Council for Antiquities, Mr Abdel Aziz Sayed Abdel Rasheed Soltan, and worked at the new storage magazine. Here Inspector Khaled M.

Mahmoud made every facility available to us. Our assigned Inspector Mr Samir Abdel Raouf Gharib was similarly helpful.

The first stage of the work involved the checking and repackaging of those objects considered by the Supreme Council to be the most significant after their cleaning in 1996. These had been stored separately and needed to be repacked. They also needed to be fully described and to have detailed publication photographs made of them. The photography has been done using entirely digital media. This will allow the designs which decorate some of the *situlae* to be 'unrolled' as well as helping to facilitate publication (Figure 3).

In examining these objects it was discovered that an unusual, hollow-cast, figure at first thought to be some kind of hedgehog or porcupine was in fact a type of beetle (Figure 4). This has been provisionally identified by Professor Paul Buckland of Bournemouth University as *Bubas bubalus*. Further research may help to suggest whether this species is particularly associated with either the ibis or the falcon species. These registered objects were also described onto an Access database.

The second stage of the work involved the rest of the objects, starting with the *situlae*. These were spread out, and each assigned an individual, unique number (Figure 5). Some had already been numbered in 1996, but this season's work completed that process. They were separated into groups according to their shape and size. In the meantime, a small

group of very large and elaborate *situlae* were given to the conservation team so that work could be begun on them. It was believed that these were the most likely to preserve any traces of inscription, and certainly had the most – and most elaborate – decoration.

All of the *situlae* were then measured, weighed and described. With so many very similar objects the weight category was considered to be a useful cross-check lest there be any confusion between the pieces at some time in the future. The groupings arrived at visually seem to be quite consistent, but it is intended that the data be examined statistically to arrive at more clearly defined groups. All of the pieces were photographed as well as described. The aim of the exercise was to make a record of every piece, and photography offered an excellent method of doing this in a relatively short period of time.

During the three weeks spent in the field, all the *situlae* were measured and photographed, and a short – coded – description made of them. However, the sheer number of pieces made it impossible to describe every one in detail. This was further complicated by the discovery that a far higher proportion of the pieces were decorated than had been expected. The data have not yet been processed, but up to three-quarters of the examples may have decoration of some kind.

The decoration normally comprises one or more bands (registers) showing a worshipper

standing to the right of a small altar or offering table, and adopting a pose of adoration. In front of him, to the left of the table stands ithyphallic Amun, and behind him come a procession of other deities. The number and selection of deities varies, as does the quality of workmanship. The base of the decorated vessels is usually in the form of a lotus flower.

Where handles remain intact, they vary considerably in their proportions. One of the team remarked that the collection overall had the appearance of a school craft project, with handles bearing no relation to the size of the vessel they were intended to serve. There is a strong impression that the person(s) who made the handles were not the same as those who produced the vessels, but were perhaps less skilled apprentices.

The conservation work carried out on the large vessels proved to be well worthwhile, although time consuming, and frequently difficult. It was found that where the blue corrosion product azurite was present, it could be softened by soaking overnight, making it easier to remove. However, where the green corrosion was present it was very hard and not susceptible to soaking. This made it extremely difficult to remove, and occasionally impossible. It was found in one case that a vessel actually contained two other objects – a figure of a shrew and a figure of the god Osiris, fused to each other and to the inside of the vessel (Figure 6). Carefully cleaning and conservation made it possible to

see these figures, but they were too heavily corroded to the vessel wall to be removed from it.

By the end of the season it became clear that some of these large vessels had the remains of hieroglyphic inscriptions present. As yet these are not sufficiently complete to be read with confidence, and the Egyptian authorities did not feel that it was necessary to add them to the register list this year, but may well do so when cleaning has been completed. The same view was taken of a small wooden object with remains of an extensive text in inlaid hieroglyphs.

This piece of wood, which until the very end of the season was too fragile to be safely handled, had been recognised as important since it was first discovered amongst the bronzes. It was initially thought to be part of a wooden shrine, perhaps used as the container in which the bronzes had been buried. However, when the piece was finally consolidated and turned over it proved to be a statue of a figure holding a smaller statue, and is probably a cippus. Time this season did not permit the complete cleaning of the inscription, and there was no time to work on the sculptured side of the piece at all. (This would be a priority for March–April 2005.)

As well as the numerous *situlae*, there are a smaller, but significant, number of other items. These comprise small offering tables or offering trays, some of which have standing or squatting figures of deities around them.



Figure 5. The Antiquities Service Workroom, showing the bronze *situlae* laid out for recording. Other objects remain to be unpacked. Photograph by Janice Coyle © Egypt Exploration Society.



Figure 6. Model of a shrew and figure of the god Osiris found fused into vessel 314. Photograph by Janice Coyle © Egypt Exploration Society.

These objects too are equipped with a handle which would have allowed them to be hung up in the shrine. There are also figures of gods, mostly Osiris or the Apis bull, although figures of Horus and Bast are also present.

Amongst the objects registered, and dealt with first this season, are a particularly fine censer handle in the form of the head of Isis, and the top of a sceptre showing the seated cat-goddess Bast on top of what is probably an open papyrus flower. There were also two small, and crudely made, schist offering tables. These had been pierced to take a loop of string by which they too could be suspended.

It is intended that next season those *situlae* identified as priorities for conservation will

be cleaned, along with the wooden statue. If time permits we will also attempt to work on some of the offering tables and figures of deities. With a collection as large as this one it will not be practical to clean every object to museum display standard, but all will be stabilised and, as now, packaged in such a way as to avoid any further deterioration of their condition.

This collection of material gives an interesting insight into the range of objects offered at the shrines of the Sacred Animal Necropolis, and gives us a glimpse of just how popular these cults were. There are vessels in a range of sizes, decorated and undecorated, which would have been sold to pilgrims of varying wealth and given to the shrines. We can imagine the workshops and stalls of those

selling these items, and start to see something of the skill (or occasionally otherwise) of these Late Period craftsmen. None of the pieces so far cleaned bears a royal cartouche, but it is likely that most belong to the 4th century BC

The Egypt Exploration Society's commitment to conservation in Egypt has proved especially fruitful in this project, and good links have been established with the conservators and inspectors of the Supreme Council for Antiquities. The writer would like to express his gratitude to all those SCA members mentioned above, as well as to Mr Kamel Wahid, Director, for their help and hospitality, and to the Cardiff/EES team for their unstinting hard work and enthusiasm.