The Discovery of Queen Ahhotep I

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The necropolis of Dra Abu el-Naga lies between the valley temple of Queen Hatshepsut and the entrance of a valley which leads to the famous Valley of the Kings (Bibân el-Moluk). More than a kilometre in length, it was the burial place of some of the most famous kings of the 18th Dynasty. About these kings we know very little, but some must have played an important part in the struggle to expel the Hyksos from Egypt. After them came the glorious 18th Dynasty, during which Egypt reached its apex of power. Thererfor the history of the site becomes one of continuous pillaging and looting, with the result that Dra Abu el-Naga is now one of the most neglected areas on the Theban west bank.

Few truly scientific excavations have been conducted at that site. The numerous rummaging carried out since the 19th century hardly deserve to be called excavations and remain unpublished. Most of what was found rests in the Cairo Museum and is also largely unpublished. Some artefacts have ended up in various collections in Europe; others have been lost.

The oldest records which refer to this burial place go back to the reign of Ramesses IX (orthodox dates c. 1127-1109), under whom a commission of enquiry was set up to investigate allegations of tomb robbery on the Theban west bank. Accounts of their investigations are preserved in the hieratic documents known as the 'Tomb Robbery Papyri'. One of the first things the commission did was make a systematic tour of the necropolis to inspect the tombs for damage. In one of their reports, the so-called Abbott Papyrus, the officials listed the tomb of six kings: Nebhepetre Antef, Sekhemre-Shedttau, Sobekemsaf II, Senakhtenra Tao I, Sekenetre Tao II, and Wazekherre Kamose. Two were found violated but the robbers had failed to enter the tombs; another had been opened and plundered.

Although no definite records exist, it is certain that pillaging and looting continued long after these enquiries and the punishment of the offenders. By the time of the High Priest Pinudjem I (1070-1055 BC), the situation had become so unbearable that some of the royal mummies were restored and reburied. At the end of the 21st Dynasty, probably during the reign of Siamun (978-959 BC), about 40 coffins containing mummies were hidden in a rock-cut tomb that had originally been intended for Queen Inhapy of the 18th Dynasty. This secret burial place remained undisturbed until, in 1881, it was discovered by local villagers, who – as had their ancestors – started to plunder it.

Working from the reports of the 'Tomb Robbery Papyri' and from his personal investigation of the site, the American Egyptologist Herbert E. Winlock attempted to reconstruct a detailed history of the place. He also attempted to locate the tombs of the kings themselves. His meticulous study forms the basis of all subsequent investigations in this field.

Further records featuring the site of Dra Abu el-Naga date from the first half of the 19th century. The tomb of King Nebhepetre Antef, mentioned in the Abbott Papyrus, was plundered by local villagers in 1827. In 1860 the tomb was rediscovered by Auguste Mariette, but no records or plans were published. Two small obelisks, which Mariette found but left at the site, probably once adorned the entrance of this tomb. Two years later, these obelisks were transported to Cairo by ship for the Bulaq museum, but were lost after the river.

Mariette is also the name associated with the events that led to the unfortunate excavations at Dra Abu el-Naga and the discovery of the burial of Queen Ahhotep I. Originally, Mariette had been sent to Egypt to acquire Coptic manuscripts for the Louvre. Although this enterprise failed, he quickly developed an interest in the ancient monuments and started excavating these instead. Perhaps the most important achievement of his early days in Egypt, and one for which he won renown, was the discovery of the Serapeum with the Apis galleries at Sakkara (cf. JACF 2 (1988), pp. 9-14). But unlike others who ‘excavated’ in Egypt at that time, Mariette also worked hard to preserve what already had been excavated. His tireless efforts led to the establishment of the first museum for such monuments at Bulaq.

Early in 1857 Prince Napoleon of France, a cousin of Emperor Napoleon III, announced his intention to visit Egypt. Said Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt, wanted to impress his royal guest. Not only should the Prince be guided through Egypt on an extensive tour, but he should also be given a collection of fine antiquities. To enliven the Prince’s visit, the Pasha arranged for the antiquities to be excavated in his presence. Mariette was to excavate the antiquities and reburied them, then the Prince was to discover the various artefacts in the course of the tour and keep them as a present. However, Prince Napoleon never came to Egypt, so the artefacts which Mariette assembled were sent to the Prince by ship.

In December of that year Mariette’s workmen at Dra Abu el-Naga stumbled over the coffin of King Kamose. The coffin was ‘hidden in a mass of rubbish into which it had been dumped, carelessly, upon its right side, but absolutely uninjured and unrobbed’. Mariette did not realise the importance of his discovery. He thought the coffin was not good enough to adorn the Prince’s collection, and indeed, the identity of the person for whom it was made did not
become apparent until fifty years later. Meanwhile, a dagger and parts of an armlet bearing the name of Ahmose were found on the mummy of Kamose and these were added to the Prince’s collection. A mirror found its way into the Louvre. Because of his excavations and the treasures he had found for the Prince, Mariette was in 1858 appointed Director of Egyptian Monuments – the Department of Egyptian Antiquities was born. Mariette was now in a position to excavate at any site that might interest him, and his workmen scoured the land from the Delta all the way to Nubia.

More than 2700 workmen dug at 35 different sites. Unable to supervise all the sites at the same time, Mariette appointed deputy supervisors to help him. One of them was Bonnefoy, his assistant from the days of the excavations at the Serapeum, whose job was to supervise the many sites in the Theban area. Shortly after his appointment, Bonnefoy died and the excavations continued without surveillance.

It was in those days that Mariette received a message from Thebes to say that a coffin had been discovered inscribed with the name of Queen Ahhotep. Its location was not far from where he had found the coffin of Kamose two years before, only closer to the hills of Dra Abu el-Naga. The events surrounding this find were more dramatic than those which accompanied the Prince’s visit. Mariette, this time aware of the importance of the discovery, at once gave orders for the coffin to be sent to Cairo. But before his orders could be executed, the governor of the province had the coffin opened. The mummy was taken out and searched. The queen’s body, stripped of its jewels, was destroyed and the bones thrown away, while the treasures were recorded in a list and sent by boat directly to the Pasha. As soon as Mariette was informed of this presumptuous deed, he leapt into his boat and sailed upstream to intercept the governor’s men. He managed to stop them and, after quarrels and threats, the jewels were handed over. Mariette brought them immediately to the Pasha and told him of the incident. Much impressed by Mariette’s initiative and sense of duty, the Pasha gratefully extracted from the jewels a gold chain and a scarab and gave them to one of his favourite wives. Later he returned these mementos and they were displayed in the museum at Bulak.

The other jewels from the burial of Ahhotep were not to arrive at their final resting place for a long time. In 1859 they were exhibited in Paris; and three years later, in London. In 1867 they were sent to the World Exhibition in Paris, where Mariette was responsible for setting up the Egyptian pavilion.

Among the many visitors to the exhibition was the Empress Eugénie. She was deeply taken with the jewels and tried to persuade the Khedive Ismail to let her have them as a present. Not knowing how to handle this delicate situation, the Khedive sought help from Mariette, but despite being sorely tempted with the title and income of a Conservateur au Louvre and like inducements, Mariette remained adamant. It was his firm belief that the antiquities and monuments should stay in the country in which they had been found. It was his sense of duty that saved Ahhotep’s jewels from being dispersed among European collections. Today they are housed in the jewellery gallery of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and number among its most impressive treasures.

Notes and References

1. *PM I*, pt. 2, pp. 599-615. Since 1991, the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo has been excavating at Dra’ Abu al-Naga; see the preliminary report by D. Polz: ‘Bericht über die erste Grabungskampagne in der Nekropole von Dra’ Abu al-Naga/Theben West’ in *MDAIK* 48 (1992), pp. 109-30. The aim of the German mission is to find and document the royal and private tombs of the 17th Dynasty and to provide further data concerning the history of the site.

2. See the list in *PM I*, pt. 2, pp. 600-05.


5. T. E. Peet: *op. cit.* [3], p. 58.


14. The armlet is also in the Louvre; the dagger is in Brussels.


17. The events are recorded in a letter of Thotmes Dèvèria (1831-1871), who was in Cairo at that time; see the translation of the letter given by H. Winlock: *op. cit.* [8]; cf. G. Maspero: *op. cit.* [16], pp. 31f-CIV.

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