The Egyptian Museum of Florence, in collaboration with the University of Florence, hosted the Eleventh International Congress of Egyptologists which took place from 23rd to 30th August 2015, under the patronage of the IAE – International Association of Egyptologists.

This volume publishes 136 papers and posters presented during the Congress. Topics discussed here range from archaeology, religion, philology, mummy investigations and archaeometry to history, offering an up-to-date account of research in these fields.

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Florence Egyptian Museum
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edited by

Gloria Rosati and Maria Cristina Guidotti
# Contents

XI International Congress of Egyptologists .............................................................................................................................................. x
Preface ................................................................................................................................................................................................. xiii

## Papers

**Development of Old Kingdom pottery: three cases studies (‘Cemetery of the Workers’, Heit el-Ghurab and the Khentkawes Town)** ........................................... 1
Sherif M. Abdelmoniem

**Of Min and moon – cosmological concepts in the Temple of Athribis (Upper Egypt)** ................................................................. 7
Victoria Altmann-Wendling

**Les relations entre l’horloge stellaire diagonale et le corpus des Textes des Sarcophages dans le sarcophage intérieur de Mésehti : le temps et les décans** ........................................... 14
Bernard Arquier

**The Qubbet el-Hawa casting moulds – Late Period bronze working at the First Cataract** ................................................................. 19
Johannes Auenmüller

**Overlapping and contradictory narratives in Ancient Egyptian visual programs** .................................................................................. 26
Jennifer Miyuki Babcock

**Sāmānu as a human disease in Mesopotamia and Egypt** .................................................................................................................. 29
Susanne Beck

**The pyramid as a journey – cultic encounters between father and son in the Pyramid of Pepy I** ....................................................... 35
Nils Billing

**The Ancient Egyptian dialects in light of the Greek transcriptions of Egyptian anthroponyms** ......................................................... 41
Ana Isabel Blasco Torres

**Dalla sabbia alla teca: esempi di interventi conservativi eseguiti su alcuni papiri del Museo Egizio di Firenze** ........................................... 46
Paola Boffula Alimeni

**New evidence on the king’s son Intefmose from Dra Abu el-Naga: a preliminary report** ............................................................... 53
Francisco L. Borrego Gallardo

**The Merenptah Sarcophagi restoration project** ................................................................................................................................. 59
Edwin C. Brock and Lyla Pinch Brock

**Egyptian names and networks in Trismegistos (800 BC – AD 800)** ................................................................................................. 64
Yanne Broux

**The Ptolemaic dedication of Archepolis in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina: materiality and text** ................................................................. 69
Patricia A. Butz

**Bernard V. Bothmer and Ptolemaic sculpture: papers on Ptolemaic art from his archives held at the Università degli Studi di Milano** .................................................................................. 75
Giorgia Cafici

**The Tell el-Maskhuta Project** ............................................................................................................................................................. 81
Giuseppina Capriotti Vittozzi and Andrea Angelini

**Silence in the Tale of the Eloquent Peasant: themes and problems** ................................................................................................. 87
Ilaria Cariddi

**Progetto Butehamon. Prospettive e ricerche nella necropoli tebana** ................................................................................................. 92
Giacomo Cavillier

**Notes on the inscribed Old and Middle Kingdom coffins in the Egyptian Turin Museum** ............................................................... 103
Emanuele M. Ciampini
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rethinking Egyptian animal worship (c. 3000 BC – c. 300 AD): towards a historical-religious perspective</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelo Colonna</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before and after the Temple: the long-lived necropolis in the area of the Temple of Millions of Years of Amenhotep II – Western Thebes</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Consolini, Tommaso Quirino and Angelo Sesana</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papyri with the Ritual of the Opening of the Mouth in the Egyptian Museum in Turin</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federico Contardi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes for a building history of the temple of Ramesses II at Antinoe. The architectural investigation</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michele Coppola</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal mummies in South African collections</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Izak Cornelius, Salima Ikram, Ruhan Slabbert, Liani C. Swanepoel, Frank Teichert and Tiffany van Zyl</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nouvelle lecture d’une scène de la théogamie d’Hatshepsout</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Coyette</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship and places of worship in the Greco-Roman town at Marina El-Alamein</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grażyna Bąkowska-Czerner and Rafał Czerner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Kingdom coffin of Khnum from the National Museum of Warsaw</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorota Czerwik</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-destructive analysis on 11 Egyptian blue faience tiles from the 2nd and 3rd Dynasties</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Davidovits and Frédéric Davidovits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenes from the Amduat on the funerary coffins and sarcophagi of the 21st Dynasty</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cásio de Araújo Duarte</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votive pottery deposits found by the Spanish Mission at Dra Abu el-Naga</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena de Gregorio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The building activity of Pinudjem I at Thebes</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriella Dembitz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ‘Book of Going Forth by Day’ in the funerary chamber of Djehuty (TT 11): past, present, and future</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucía Díaz-Iglesias Llanos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pre-Egyptological concept of Egypt as a challenge for Egyptology and the efforts to establish a research community</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florian Ebeling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gebelein Archaeological Project, 2013–2016</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wojciech Ejsmond</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trois nouvelles harpes découvertes à Thèbes ouest: Quel apport pour l’égyptologie ?</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibylle Emerit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ‘pantheistic’ deities. Report from research on iconography and role of polymorphic deities</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grzegorz First</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Études sur le cadre de vie d’une association religieuse dans l’Égypte gréco-romaine : l’exemple de Touna el-Gebel...</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mélanie C. Flossmann-Schütze</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forme di imitazione egizia nella decorazione architettonica di Nea Paphos</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonardo Fuduli</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmose-Sapair in Dra Abu el-Naga: old and new evidence</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José M. Galán</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Moon god Iah in ancient Egyptian religion</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gudelia García-Fernández</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of loyalty to the king – A socio-cultural analysis of basilophoric personal names dating to the Old and Middle Kingdoms</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina Geisen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Love and gold in cross-cultural discourse in the Amarna letters ................................................................. 233
Graciela Gestoso Singer

Some unpublished inscriptions from Quarry P at Hatnub .......................................................... 237
Yannis Gourdon and Roland Enmarch

Names of eye parts in different text genres: a contribution to technical language in ancient Egypt .......... 242
Nadine Gräßler

The transformation of Theban Tomb 39 (TT39). A contribution from a conservation viewpoint in terms of its history after dynastic occupation .......................................................... 247
Dulce María Grimaldi and Patricia Meehan

The complete corpus of viticulture and winemaking scenes from the ancient Egyptian private tombs .......... 254
Maria Rosa Guasch-Jané, Sofia Fonseca and Mahmoud Ibrahim

Des étoiles et des hommes : peurs, désirs, offrandes et prières .......................................................... 260
Nadine Guilhou

Cracking a code: deciphering the marks of the royal necropolis workmen of the New Kingdom .......... 266
Ben Haring

The Egyptian Dionysus: Osiris and the development of theater in Ancient Egypt ........................................ 271
Allison Hedges

The Abydos Dynasty: an osteoarchaeological examination of human remains from the SIP royal cemetery .... 276
Jane A. Hill, Maria A. Rosado and Joseph Wegner

You up – I down: orientational metaphors concerning ancient Egyptian Kingship in royal iconography and inscriptions .......................................................... 283
Shih-Wei Hsu

Image processing. Elaboration and manipulation of the human figure in the Pyramid Texts........................ 287
Francesca Iannarilli

Hieroglyphic inscriptions on precious objects: some notes on the correlation between text and support .... 291
Agnese Iob

Predynastic precursors to the Festival of Drunkenness: beer, climate change, cow-goddesses, and the ideology of kingship .......................................................... 296
Victoria Jensen

Crowdsourcing in Egyptology – images and annotations of Middle Kingdom private tombs .......... 303
Peter Kalchgruber and Lubica Hudáková

‘To build a temple in the beautiful white stone of Anu’. The use of Tura limestone in Theban architecture .......... 308
Christina Karshausen and Thierry De Putter

The motif of the kiosk during the first half of the 18th dynasty .......................................................... 313
Edyta Kopp

A heritage in peril: the threat to Egypt’s urban archaeological sites .......................................................... 318
Peter Lacovara

Le sḏm.f circonstanciel. Une forme verbale rare en néo-égyptien littéraire ........................................ 320
Vincent Pierre-Michel Laisney

Amduat type papyri in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow ........................................ 325
Nika Lavrentyeva

Carving out identities in the Egyptian desert: self-presentation styles adopted by the ancient travelers of Kharga Oasis .......................................................... 328
Nikolaos Lazaridis

Ya-t-il une « fabrique d’albâtre » et un atelier de tissage au Ramesseum ? .......................................................... 333
Guy Lecuyot
Deux nouvelles 'Recommandations aux prêtres' datées de Ptolémée X Alexandre Ier
Nicolas Leroux

Scenes representing temple rituals on some 21st Dynasty coffins
Éva Liptay

Building B, a domestic construction at Tell el-Ghaba, North Sinai
Silvia Lupo, Eduardo Crivelli Montero, Claudia Kohen and Eva Calomino

The Montecelio Obelisk in Rome
Lise Manniche

The role of e-learning in Egyptology: 'Hieroglyphs: Step-by-Step' website as a case study
Ahmed Mansour and Azza Ezzat

The function and importance of some special categories of stars in the Ancient Egyptian funerary texts,
1: ỉḥḫ- and ḫḏ-stars
Alicia Maravelia

Chapel of the tomb belonging to Amenhotep III’s Vizier, Amenhotep Huy. Asasif Tomb No. 28, Luxor-West Bank.
Francisco J. Martín-Valentín and Teresa Bedman

Objets découverts dans des tombes thébaines situées sous le Temple de Millions d’Années de Thoutmosis III à l’ouest de Louxor
Javier Martínez Babón

Fish offerings found in Area 32 of the archaeological site of Oxyrhynchus (El-Bahnasa, Egypt)
Maite Mascort Roca and Esther Pons Mellado

The Akh-menu of Thutmose III at Karnak. The Sokarian Rooms
Julie Masquelier-Loorius

The 13th Dynasty at Abydos: a royal tomb and its context
Dawn McCormack

The transmission of the Book of the Twelve Caverns
Daniel M. Méndez Rodríguez

A new reading of Problem No. 53 in the Rhind Mathematical Papyrus. The limits of proportionality
Marianne Michel

The ang-morphs in Coptic and their grammaticalization in Later Egyptian
So Miyagawa

'Augmented Reality’ technology and the dissemination of historical graffiti in the Temple of Debod
Miguel Ángel Molinero Polo, Alfonso Martín Flores, Jorge Martín Gutiérrez, Cristóbal Ruiz Medina, Lucía Díaz-Iglesias Llanos, Fernando Guerra-Libreiro Fernández, Daniel Miguel Méndez Rodríguez, Luis Navarrete Ruiz, Manuel Rivas Fernández and Ovidia Soto Martín

The Min Project. First working seasons on the unpublished Tomb of Min (TT109) and Tomb Kampp -327-:
the Tomb of May and a replica of the Tomb of Osiris
Irene Morfini and Milagros Álvarez Sosa

Figurative vase painting from the First Intermediate Period through to the Fatimid Dynasty: a continuity?
Maya Müller

Basic considerations on the construction of pyramids in the Old Kingdom
Frank Müller-Römer

Die Verwendung von Münzen in pharaonischer Zeit
Renate Müller-Wollermann

In the footsteps of Ricardo Caminos: rediscovering the 'Speos of Gebel el Silsila'
Maria Nilsson and Philippe Martinez

The folding cubit rod of Kha in Museo Egizio di Torino, S.8391
Naoko Nishimoto
The mystery of the ‘high place’ from the *Abbott Papyrus* revealed? The results of the works of the Polish Cliff Mission at Deir el-Bahari 1999–2014 ................................................................. 457
Andrzej Niwiński

The mummies of the ‘Three Sisters’ in the Museo Egizio: a case study. Conservation and studies of textiles and bandages ........................................................................................................ 462
Cinzia Oliva and Matilde Borla

Technical aspects of faience from Hierakonpolis, Egypt – a preliminary report ................................................ 468
Marina Panagiota, Elizabeth Walters, Yannis Maniatis and Anna Tsoupra

*Horus Seneferou ka-s*: quand le dernier souverain de la Ire dynastie devint la première femme pharaon de l’Histoire à porter un nom d’Horus .......................................................................................................................... 472
Jean-Pierre Pätznick

The Herakleopolis Magna Project: seasons 2012–2015 ...................................................................................... 480
M. Carmen Pérez-Die

The Stelae Ridge cairns: a reassessment of the archaeological evidence ........................................... 485
Hannah Pethen

The Italian-Egyptian Mission at the Monastery of Abba Nefer at Manqabad: results of the first four seasons’ work .......................................................................................................................... 491
Rosanna Pirelli, Ilaria Incordino, Paola Buzi and Anna Salsano

*Wedjat-eyes* as a dating criterion for false doors and stelae to the early Middle Kingdom ........................................... 499
Melanie Pitkin

La collection égyptienne du Musée Sandelin à Saint-Omer (France) ........................................................................ 506
Jean-Louis Podvin

Some remarks on the Egyptian reception of foreign military technology during the 18th Dynasty: a brief survey of the armour .................................................................................................................. 513
Alberto Maria Pollastrini

Medical re-enactments: Ancient Egyptian prescriptions from an emic viewpoint ......................................... 519
Tanja Pommerening

Textual layers in *Coffin Texts* spells 154–160 ........................................................................................................ 527
Gyula Priskin

The cat mummies of the Societá Africana d’Italia: an archaeological, cultural and religious perspective ................................................................. 532
Maria Diletta Pubblico

*Khnum the Creator*: a puzzling case of the transfer of an iconographic motif ............................................... 538
Maarten J. Raven

Temple ranks in the Fayyum during the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods: documentary sources and archaeological data ............................................................................................................. 543
Ilaria Rossetti

Le musée de Mallawi: état des lieux après les destructions et projets pour l’avenir ........................................ 549
Ashraf Alexandre Sadek

A new light on Coptic afterlife (O.4550 from the Coptic Museum in Cairo) .................................................. 553
Hind Salah El-Din Somida Awad

The lost chapels of Elephantine. Preliminary results of a reconstruction study through archival documents ........ 556
Daniele Salvoldi and Simon Delvaux

Doors to the past. Rediscovering fragments in the new blockyard at Medinet Habu ........................................ 563
Julia Schmied

Les dépôts de fondation de la Vallée des Rois : nouvelles perspectives de recherche sur l’histoire de la nécropole royale du Nouvel Empire ................................................................. 568
François C. A. Schmitt

V
Economic mentalities and Ancient Egyptian legal documents .................................................................576
Alexander Schütze

Excavations in the ‘Temple of Millions of Years’ of Thutmose III .......................................................... 581
Myriam Seco Álvarez

Rituels funéraires au temps de Hatchepsout : le sanctuaire de la tombe de Djehouty et ses parallèles ................587
José M. Serrano

The so-called Book of Two Ways on a Middle Kingdom religious leather roll ........................................... 594
Wael Sherbiny

Ibyc. PMGF 287 and Ancient Egyptian love songs .................................................................................... 597
Anna Sofia

The Physiologus in Egypt .......................................................................................................................... 603
Marco Stroppa

A survey of astronomical tables on Middle Kingdom coffin lids ............................................................... 608
Sarah L. Symons

Blue painted pottery from a mid-18th Dynasty royal mud-brick structure in northwest Saqqara .................. 613
Kazumitsu Takahashi

Studies on BD 17 vignettes: iconographic typology of Rw.tj-scene (New Kingdom – Third Intermediate Period) 619
Mykola Tarasenko

Were components of Amarna composite statues made in separate workshops? ....................................... 626
Kristin Thompson

Research on Old Kingdom ‘dissimilation graphique’. World-view and categorization .............................. 633
Simon Thuault

La funzione del tempio tolemaico di Deir el-Medina alla luce dell’archeologia .................................... 638
Claudia Tirel Cena

The ‘geography’ of the hierogrammateis: the religious topography of the Western Harpoon (7th Nome of Lower Egypt) ....................................................................................................................... 644
Elena Tiribilli

The Ancient Egyptian shabtis discovered in the regions of Roman Illyricum (Dalmatia, Pannonia) and Istria: provenance, collections, typological study and dating .......................................................... 650
Mladen Tomorad

From Egypt to the Holy Land: first issues on the Egyptian collection in the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Jerusalem ........................................................................................................................................... 656
Benedetta Torrini

Tradition and innovation within the decoration program of the temple of Ramesses II at Gerf Hussein ........ 661
Martina Ullmann

The Egyptian Execration Statuettes (EES) Project ...................................................................................... 667
Athena Van der Perre

A new long-term digital project on Hieratic and cursive hieroglyphs ......................................................... 671
Urnsula Verhoeven and Svenja A. Gülden

Hierakonpolis Faience, 2005–2013, with context and accompanying finds – a quest for chronology and possible use ............................................................................................................................. 676
Elizabeth J. Walters, Amr El Gohary, Shelton S. Alexander, Richard R. Parizek, David P. Gold, Recep Cakir, Marina Panagiotaki, Yannis Maniatis and Anna Tsoupra

The Berlin Plans from the New Kingdom Period ......................................................................................... 680
Yoshifumi Yasuoka

The career of Nakhtmin (TT 87) as revealed by his funerary cones ........................................................... 686
Kento Zenihiro
Object biographies and political expectations: Egyptian artefacts, Welsh Heritage and the regional community
museum

Katharina Zinn

Who am I - and if so, how many? Some remarks on the ‘j-augment’ and language change

Monika Zöller-Engelhardt

Poster presentations

Vocabulaire de l’Égyptien Ancien (VÉgA). Plateforme numérique de recherche lexicographique

A. Almásy, Ch. Cassier, J. Chun-Hung-Kee, F. Contardi, M. Massiera, A. Nespoulous-Phalippou and Fr. Rouffet

Pottery from the early Roman rubbish dumps in Berenike harbour

Agnieszka Dzwonek

A sequence of five 13th Dynasty structures at Memphis

Rabee Eissa

Funerary culture of the Memphite region during the Early Dynastic Period

Barbora Janulíková

3D-Reconstructions of Late Roman fortresses in Egypt

Dmitry Karelin, Maria Karelina and Tatiana Zhitpeleva

The Roman Imperial cult temple at Luxor: its architecture and possible connection between Roman and Egyptian cultures

Irina Kulikova and Dmitry Karelin

One of the earliest discovered houses at Memphis

Hanan Mahmoud Mohamed

Reden und Rufe, are they kingly patterns? A first step towards an explanation of the origin(s) of speech captions in ‘daily life’ scenes in private tombs

Aurore Motte

Étude pluridisciplinaire de têtes de momies (Lyon)

Annie Perraud, Matthieu Ménager, Pascale Richardin and Catherine Vieillescazes

Progetto Osiris: valorizzazione delle piccole collezioni egizie

Massimiliana Pozzi Battaglia e Federica Scatena

Study and restoration of two mummies from the Moulins Museum

Noëlle Timbart

List of papers presented at ICE XI

Massimiliano Franci
Fish offerings found in Area 32 of the archaeological site of Oxyrhynchus (El-Bahnasa, Egypt)

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Servei d’Arqueologia i Paleontologia de la Generalitat de Catalunya, Member of the Archaeological Mission of Oxyrhynchus

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Abstract
During the 2012 season of excavations at the archaeological site of Oxyrhynchus, an exceptional discovery was made of a phenomenon not found anywhere else to date. Immediately under the layers containing Roman tombs (the south wall of funerary chamber no. 3 of tomb 11) there appeared a large strata of dark-coloured soil in the shape of a cross, containing several layers of a huge amount of different size fish. We separated each one of these and at the end of the season counted approximately 2500 fish. In 2013 we continued excavation work in the area to the southwest and discovered another huge stratum, again in the form of a cross. This stratum contained approximately 3000 fish of the same type, but this time in mumified form. We decided to save the complete excavation of these votive fish deposit remains for a later date, and in 2015 completed the excavations. 97% of the fish were of the Mormyridae family (Mormyrus Cashive and Mormyrus Kannume), in other words Oxyrhynchus, which was the symbol of the city. The other 3% were represented by lepidotes, catfish, and the remains of some cats. The discoveries were, moreover, very important in terms of the funerary cult that developed in the Nome of Oxyrhynchus, and in particular in the High Necropolis.

Keywords
Oxyrhynchus; oxyrhynchus fish; Thoeris; votive offering; High Necropolis

The archaeological site of Oxyrhynchus (El-Bahnasa), corresponding to the ancient city of Per Medyed, is located 190km south of Cairo, on the banks of the Bar Yusuf, at the crossroads of the caravan routes leading to the oases of the western deserts, especially to Bahariya (Figure 1).

The Archaeological Mission of the University of Barcelona, under the direction of Dr Josep Padró Parcerisa, has the concession for the area of the necropolis located on the left bank of the Bar Yusuf, a complex area where we can find burials from the Saite Period up to Christian-Byzantine times. In this large site there

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is a raised area called the ‘High Necropolis’, where the most significant tombs of this necropolis are found.

The upper layers consist of a funerary construction made of mud bricks that dates from Christian-Byzantine times, but once this construction had been excavated, we discovered several tombs built of white, fairly regular limestone blocks, in some cases with the vaulted ceilings still intact. Given the characteristics of the tombs and the archaeological material that we found inside them, we can state that they belong to the Roman Period.

One of the most important tombs, owing to its characteristics and funerary objects, is Tomb 11. It has a stairway giving access to a small entrance hall that connects directly with three funerary chambers. In the 2012 season we made a discovery to the south of funerary chamber 3 of this tomb, an exceptional discovery both in type and size, making it unique to date at the archaeological site of Oxyrhynchus and in Egypt as a whole: one huge offering of fish (Mascort and Pons 2016; 2017).

Immediately under the layers containing Roman tombs there appeared a chapel built of mud bricks, in bad condition, possibly of the end of the Saite Period, and a large stratum of dark-coloured soil in the shape of a cross, bordered on all four sides by fine, white sand. This stratum has been named ‘Area 32’ and it contained several layers of a vast amount of fish (Figure 2).

One part of this fish deposit was in contact with the chapel walls, and in many parts crept up the sides of the wall. From this fact we can deduce that the fish stratum dates from after the construction of the chapel; and when we decided to remove the south wall of Room 3 of Tomb 11, for safety reasons, it could be seen that the construction of this tomb was posterior to the depositing of the fish, because one part of the fish stratum was underneath the tomb.

As the excavations proceeded, we discovered that this area was formed of several layers of pieces of thin wood and palm leaves, on top of which was a huge quantity of backbones belonging to fish of very different sizes (from 10–15cm to 120cm). We separated each one, and at the end of the season counted approximately 2500 fish (Figure 3).

To the west of the chapel we found a wall built of limestone blocks. The blocks of this wall are undulating, appearing to create waves – in what could be a reference to the waters of the Nile, similar to the walls that form the temenos of the temples. However, the ‘wave’ effect could also just be the result of subsidence.

Given the large quantity of fish and the need to do a comprehensive study of this find, the Archaeological Mission of Oxyrhynchus contacted Wim van Neer, the foremost specialist in archaeozoology, who proceeded to join the Mission’s team. On arrival at the excavation in 2013, Dr van Neer studied the 2500 fish and determined that 99% of them were represented by the Mormyridae family (Mormyrus Cashive and Mormyrus Kannume), in other words Oxyrhynchus, which was the traditional symbol of the city. The other 1% comprised some lepidotes (another big river fish), catfish, one large perch, and even the remains of some cats.

During this new season we continued excavation work to the south west of this area (Area 32) and discovered another huge stratum, again in the shape of a cross, that also contained thousands of fish of the same type, but which this time had been treated differently (Padró et al. 2013: 3–6)(Figure 4).

The fish in this area had been wrapped in esparto grass, and in some cases in cloth. The largest ones (c. 120cm long) were individually wrapped, and the rest bundled in groups forming small packages. All the fish in this deposit were mumified (Figures 5 and 6).

Thousands of vertebrae of different sizes were studied and the fish separated – ranging from 15cm to 120cm in length.

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2 The archaeological team was comprised of: Maite Mascort (Egyptologist), Esther Pons (Egyptologist), and with the collaboration of Wim Van Neer (archaeozoologist), Hassan Amer (Egyptologist), Nuria Castellano (Egyptologist), Dolors Codina (archaeologist), Irene Ruidavets (archaeologist), Marguerite Errouxe-Morfin (Egyptologist), Thomas Sagory (archaeologist), Antonio López (surveyor), and Bernat Burgaya (restorer).

3 Archaeozoologist at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (Brussels) and the University of Leuven (Laboratory of de Biodiversity and Evolutionary Genomics).
Fish offerings found in Area 32 of the archaeological site of Oxyrhynchus (El-Bahnasa, Egypt)

The total number was estimated at c. 2000 fishes. 97% of the fish were of the Mormyridae family (Mormyrus Cashive and Mormyrus Kannume), in other words Oxyrhynchus; the other 3% belonging to some lepidotes, catfish, and the remains of some cats.

During the excavation we found a wooden Hathoric crown (Figure 7). The find is of great significance, as this type of crown represents the divinity attributed to the oxyrhynchus fish.4

Given the size of the find, in the end we decided to save part of the votive fish deposit for excavation in the following seasons.

At the southern end of this layer of fish we found a small area of dark earth filled with the remains of a stone sculpture, in very bad condition, and many fragments of pottery. This area of earth was on top of the mouth of a well (120cm outer diameter, 90cm inner diameter and a depth of at least 4m). The well is built of stone blocks, and inside there are hollows cut into the inner surface at 1m intervals to provide steps to facilitate access. When the excavations reached a depth of 4m we had to stop working because the water table surfaced, and as a result it is not possible to know exactly how deep the well is.

In the 2015 season the remainder of the votive fish deposit that we had decided to reserve for later work was excavated. During the excavation work we paid special attention to the way the deposit had been organized, and discovered that the fish were mainly oriented in a north-south and in an east-west direction.

We documented the different ways in which the fish had been treated, as we had done for the 2013 season. Occasionally, a

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4 H: 12.5cm; W: 6.8cm.
single fish was found wrapped as a package in a piece of cloth (these single fish were usually c. 100–120 cm in length), but in general several fish were packed together. In most cases, small fish were located between the packages of larger fish wrapped in cloth. Layers of vegetable fibres were observed around the cloth that were later identified as being of esparto grass.

Dr van Neer studied approximately 68,800 vertebrae, and as we know that each fish has around 50 vertebrae, we estimated a total of 1376 fish. Most of these fish were Mormyrus (oxyrhynchus), the same as in the finds of the two previous seasons, but we also found some Bagrus (phagrus), Barbus and Clarias, as well as cats, domestic mice, and shrews (Figure 8). No other archaeological object was found on or near the fish.

In total, therefore, we recorded a huge offering of fish (c. 6000), between 10–15 cm and 100–120 cm in length, many of them mummified and wrapped in cloth. 96% of them are Mormyrus (oxyrhynchus), but there are also specimens of Bagrus (phagrus), Barbus and Clarias, as well as some cats, domestic mice, and shrews.

It is important to note the close relation of this fish with the funerary cult that developed in the Nome of Oxyrhynchus, and in particular in the High Necropolis. The massive amount of offerings of sacred animals is a practice that dates from about the 4th century BC, but in this case we think that our offering deposit is likely to be from the end of Saite Period, or somewhat later, but always before the Roman Period.

In the Greco-Roman era the oxyrhynchus fish was one of the main deities of the city, from which it took its name. Strabo says that the inhabitants of Oxyrhynchus worshipped this fish and had a temple dedicated to it, although so far no trace has been found of this temple.

As a result of clandestine excavations in the area of El-Bahnasa and Zawiyet Barmacha in the 1960s and 70s, large quantities of bronze oxyrhynchus fish of the Saite-Persian Period began to arrive on the antiquities market. Many of these bronze fish wear a Hathoric crown and rest on a sled-shaped base, which in all likelihood indicates that they represent the goddess Thoeris. In some cases a figure of a priest kneels in front the fish (Padró and Erroux-Morfin 2004; Padró et al. 2005: 184; Erroux-Morfin 2006: 3–8; Erroux-Morfin 2011: 57–60).

The oxyrhynchus fish is also of central importance in Plutarch’s account of Set’s fratricidal fight with Osiris in order to wrestle from him the throne of Egypt. After cutting Osiris’s body into fourteen pieces he spread the pieces throughout Egypt. The phallus was thrown into the river and devoured by three fish (a lepidote, a phagrus and an oxyrhynchus) in some part of the XIX Nome of Upper Egypt. Plutarch adds that because of this the three fish that feature in the myth of Osiris are fish connected with the rising of the Nile, or which announce the coming floods by their presence.5

Unfortunately we only have one example of these bronze fish. In 2010 we found one bronze oxyrhynchus (mounted on a plain base, not a sled) in Room 3 of Tomb 23. The object still had traces of the cloth/material that was used to wrap it (Burgaya 2012: 63–5; Pons 2015: 478–84).

Evidence shows that there was also a cult of the goddess Thoeris in the XIX Nome of Upper Egypt from the 19th Dynasty. According to the Wilbour Papyrus, during the Greco-Roman period Thoeris was one of the most worshipped goddesses in Oxyrhynchus (Gardiner 1948: 48). There were several temples dedicated to this deity, the most important being the Thoereion/Thoerion in the centre of the city. In spite of the relevance of this goddess, so far no temple from the Pharaonic Period dedicated to Thoeris has been found, nor any remains belonging to it. However, thanks to the inscriptions on a Saite tomb (No. 1), especially one from the era of Cleopatra (about Priest Pa-di-Neith, Prophete of Thoeris) and one from the High

5 Plutarch’s Moralia 358A-B (De iside c. 18), Babbitt 1936, V: 44-7.
Necropolis (No. 14), it can be claimed that the inhabitants of Oxyrhynchus worshipped this goddess from the Saite Period (Goyon 2014: 111).

A stone stele with a Greek inscription, which may come from El-Bahnasa in the era of Ptolemy Alexander Philometer (107–88 BC), is further evidence of the connection between the goddess Thoeris and the oxyrhynchus fish. In the lower part of the text of this monument, which talks about a temple dedicated to Thoeris, two fish appear in front of an altar: on the left is an oxyrhynchus, with the crown of Hathor and two feathers, and on the right a lepidote, also with an Hathoric crown but with no feathers (Heine 1991: 41–53; Piedrafita 2008: 135; Rodríguez 2008: 352–4; Padró 2014: 564). There are also two stelae from the area of El-Bahnasa with the image of these two fish facing each other (Kessler 1983: 176–80; Aubert and Aubert 2001: 327; Padró et al. 2006: 14).

In addition, these fish are to be found on a sarcophagus in Room 1 of Tomb 3 in the High Necropolis (Padró and Erroux-Morfin 2004: 402, 405, 406). During excavation work in Tombs 11 and 12, we also found several mummies covered in cartonnage with polychromatic paintings showing, at chest height, two fish facing each other: an oxyrhynchus and a lepidote (Padró et al. 2010: 10–3).

Although the excavation work of this fish deposit is complete, we have yet to finish our study of the finds. In the next season we want to continue working around this deposit, to try and discover why it was placed in this area. We hope to finish this as soon as possible and then publish the results.

Bibliography


