

STONE OBJECTS FROM THE SO-CALLED GOVERNOR PALACE AT TELL BASTA

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Abstract: *The Middle Kingdom building complex at Tell Basta, which was first excavated by Shafik Farid in 1961, was originally interpreted as a temple, but later understood as a palace. In this article, it will be suggested that it might have been a "royal cult complex". This interpretation is supported by several finds from the building, which have not been fully published yet. New photographs of these will be provided.*

Key words: *Tell Basta, Palace, Royal cult complex*

Introduction

During his excavation in the northern part of Tell Basta in 1961 Shafik Farid revealed a large building to the east of el-Moahda road. This building was interpreted by Farid as a temple, dating to the time of Amenemhet III.² But later – in his paper and report presented at the fifth Congress of Antiquities in the Arab countries, held in Cairo by the Arab league – he changed this interpretation and considered this building to represent a Middle Kingdom palace that dated to the time of Amenemhet III.³ This new interpretation was adopted by all researchers working on the architecture of the building.⁴ However, the building still raises a lot of

arguments considering its actual function due to its location next to the Middle Kingdom cemetery of the elite of Tell Basta,⁵ and the fact that this spot was used as a burial ground since the Old Kingdom⁶ and even earlier from the Archaic period onwards,⁷ in addition to our lack of information about Middle Kingdom temples. This, together with other geo-archaeological evidence, led me to suggest that this building may represent a "royal cult complex", following Shafer's classification of temples.⁸

A team of the Austrian Academy of Sciences directed by Manfred Bietak in cooperation with the University of Würzburg and the SCA has been working in the area of the palace since 2012 by restudying, cleaning and completing the excavation of the building complex.⁹

Since the function of an archaeological building cannot be determined from its architectural plan alone, but also from the objects discovered in it, which help to understand the function of the building and its different units besides its actual dating, I found it important to report on the small objects, mainly of stone, discovered within the building area in the 60s of the last century, which have not been fully published yet.¹⁰ When these objects were transported from the basement of the

¹ SCA

² FARID, SH., Preliminary report on the Excavations of the Antiquities Department at Tell Basta Season 1961, *ASAE* 58 (1964), 90ff, Fig. 4.

³ جامعة الدول العربية، المؤتمر الخامس للآثار في البلاد العربية (القاهرة) 19-24 ابريل "نيسان" (1969) القاهرة 1971 ص 271، ص 693.

⁴ VAN SICLEN III, C.C., Remarks on the Middle Kingdom Palace at Tell Basta, in: M. BIETAK (ed.), *Haus und Palast im Alten Ägypten*, Wien 1996, 239ff, fig.1.; TIETZE Ch. and ABD EL-MAKSOUH M., *Tell Basta, A Guide to the site*, 18–20; UPHILL, E.P., *Egyptian Towns and Cities*, London 1988, 17–19; ELSAWI, A., Some Objects Found at Tell Basta (Season 1966-67), *ASAE* 63 (1979), 155–159.

⁵ VAN SICLEN III, C.C., The Mayors of Basta in the Middle Kingdom, *Akten München* 1985, 4, 187–194.

⁶ BAKR, M.I., The Old Kingdom at Bubastis: excavations since 1978. Outline, in: *The Archaeology, Geography and History of the Delta*, Oxford 1989, 29–52.

⁷ EL-SAWY, A., *Excavations at Tell Basta. Report of Seasons 1967 - 1971 and Catalogue of Finds*, Prague 1979, 63, figs. 105–108; KROEPER, K., The Excavations of the Munich East-Delta Expedition in Minshat in Abu Omar, in: E.C.M. VAN DEN BRINK (ed.), *The Archaeology of the Nile Delta, Egypt: Problems and Priorities*. Proceedings of the Seminar held in Cairo, 19-22 October 1986, Leiden 1988, 18, figs. 210–213.

⁸ SHAFER B.E., in: SHAFER B.E (ed.), *Temples of Ancient Egypt*, Cornell University Press 1997, 4f; ASHMAWY A.A., Tell Basta: Ancient topography and architecture, forthcoming in *BMSAES*.

⁹ BIETAK M. and LANGE E., Tell Basta: the palace of the Middle Kingdom, *EA* 44 (2014), 4–7.

¹⁰ See M.I. BAKR, H. BRANDL and F. KALLONIATIS (eds.), *Egyptian Antiquities from the Eastern Nile Delta (= Museums in the Nile Delta*. Bd. 2), Opaion/ Project Museums in the Nile Delta, Cairo/ Berlin 2014.



a



b



c

Fig. 1 a) B.175; b) B.664; c) B.176 (Photos: Aiman Ashmawy Ali)



a



b

Fig. 2 a, b) B.189 (Photos: Aiman Ashmawy Ali)

Cairo museum to the archaeological magazine at Tell el-Yahudia, I had the opportunity to check some of them and take new photographs, hoping to contribute to the interpretation of the function of this building.

Catalogue

B.175* (Fig. 1a)

Limestone, 25.0 cm x 25.0 cm x 49.0 cm

Middle Kingdom

Naos, found in the debris outside the western wall of the building complex to the south. It was half a meter on top of the floor, traces of red colour were still preserved on the surface.

¹¹ See map in VAN SICLEN III, C.C., Remarks on the Middle Kingdom Palace at Tell Basta, in: M. BIETAK (ed.), *Haus und Palast im Alten Ägypten*, Wien 1996, 239, fig.1; 243, Fig. 8.

* The letter (B) refers to the site of Tell Basta, while the number refers to the number in the register book. This system was introduced by Farid during the registration of the objects from the excavation.

B.176 (Fig. 1c)

Limestone, 69.0 cm x 33.5 cm x 12.0 cm

Middle Kingdom

Elliptical basin, found in the debris south of the building complex, traces of fire are still found on the edges.

B.189 (Fig. 2a–b)

Sandstone (red quartzite), 15.5 cm x 10.5 cm

Middle Kingdom

Part of a statuette, representing the lower part of the face, including the lower part of the nose, the mouth, the chin and part of the neck. It was found on the floor of the second hall¹¹ at its southeastern corner. The facial characteristics show a wide nose, straight mouth and a prominent chin. (FARID, *ASAE* 58 (1964), 94; b/w photo *ibid.* Pl. 9A; BAKR, BRANDL and KALLONIATIS (eds.), *Egyptian Antiquities from the Eastern Nile Delta* (MIN 2), Fig. 15).

B.190 (Fig. 3a–b)

Sandstone (red quartzite), 7.5 cm x 6.5 cm

Middle Kingdom

Head of a statuette, which was found like B.189 on the floor of the second hall at its southeastern corner, wearing a wig, the facial characteristics showing small eyes, large projecting ears placed high, the eyebrows not being indicated in relief but flowing the natural line of the brow, the chin being less prominent. The surface is eroded but it was originally highly polished. It is broken into two parts and restored, a protruding at the back of the head and the right side of the face indicate that this was part of a group statue with a high back slab.¹² (FARID, *ASAE* 58 (1964), 94; b/w photo in BAKR, BRANDL and KALLONIATIS (eds.), *Egyptian Antiquities from the Eastern Nile Delta* (MIN 2), Fig. 10).

B.191 (Fig. 4a–b)

Sandstone (red quartzite), 7.0 cm x 6.0 cm

Middle Kingdom

Part of a statuette representing part of the head. Most of the face is preserved except for the right ear, part of the headdress, the brow and the upper

¹² For group statues from this period, compare SIMPSON, W.K., The Middle Kingdom in Egypt: Some Recent Acquisitions, *Boston Museum Bulletin* 72, No. 368 (1974), 103, Fig. 3; ALDRED, C., *Egyptian Art in the Days of the Pharaohs. 3100-320 BC*, London (1980), 132, no. 94; BORCHARDT, L., *Statuen und Statuetten von Königen und Privatleuten im Museum zu Kairo, Nr. 1–1294*. – Berlin 1925, Teil 2, 51–52, no. 459, pl. 76.



a



b

Fig. 3 a, b) B.190 (Photos: Aiman Ashmawy Ali)

part of the left ear. The facial characteristics show a round face, wide eyes, a straight mouth, a wide nose, and a prominent chin with beauty spot. The preserved part of the headdress shows that it extends far down over the chest, which indicates that this statuette might belong to a lady or a goddess.¹³ (FARID, *ASAE* 58 (1964), 94; b/w photo in BAKR, BRANDL and KALLONIATIS (eds.), *Egyptian Antiquities from the Eastern Nile Delta* (MIN 2), Fig. 11).

¹³ Compare HAYES, W.C., *The Scepter of Egypt. Part I: From the Earliest Times to the End of the Middle Kingdom*, New York 1953, 200, Fig. 122; 215, Fig. 132; SCHAEFFER C.F.A.,



a



b

Fig. 4 a, b) B.191 (Photos: Aiman Ashmawy Ali)

B.192 (Fig. 8b)

Sandstone (quartzite), 6.5 cm x 3.5 cm

Middle Kingdom

Part of a statuette representing a part of a right hand, broken and restored. It was found on the floor of the second hall. (b/w photo in BAKR, BRANDL and KALLONIATIS (eds.), *Egyptian Antiquities from the Eastern Nile Delta* (MIN 2), Fig. 9, above).

Les fouilles de Minet-El-Beida et de Ras-Shamra. Quatrième campagne (printemps 1932): rapport sommaire, *Syria* 14 fascicule 2, 1933. Pl. XV no. 2.

B.193 (Fig. 8a)
 Black granite, 6.5 cm x 5.5 cm x 4.0 cm
 Middle Kingdom
 Base of a statuette with part of the left foot, found on the floor of the second hall, at its southeastern



a



b

Fig. 5 a, b) B.357 (Photos: Aiman Ashmawy Ali)

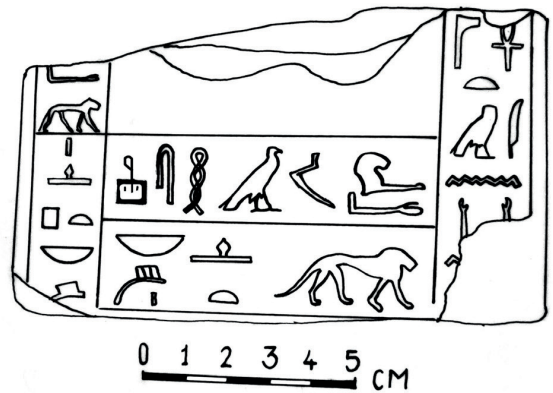
side, well polished. (b/w photo in BAKR, BRANDL and KALLONIATIS (eds.), *Egyptian Antiquities from the Eastern Nile Delta* (MIN 2), Fig. 9, below).

B.357 (Fig. 5a–b)
 Sandstone (red quartzite), 17.0 cm x 9.0 cm
 Middle Kingdom
 Part of a statue representing the left part of the face, which includes the left eye, part of the cheek, and the head cloth. The preserved part of the head cloth shows that it was a linen head cloth. On the left temple, a small portion of the natural hair is visible. It was found in the debris outside the eastern wall of the building complex, about 1 m above the floor. (FARID, *ASAE* 58 (1964), 94; b/w photo *ibid.* Pl. 9B; BAKR, BRANDL and KALLONIATIS (eds.), *Egyptian Antiquities from the Eastern Nile Delta* (MIN 2), Fig. 14).

B.513 (Fig. 6a–b)
 Black granite, 13.0 cm x 7.5 cm x 3.5 cm
 Middle Kingdom
 Base of a statue with four lines of hieroglyphic inscription in sunk relief. It was found in the debris southwest of the building complex about



a



b

Fig. 6 a, b) B.513 (Photos: Aiman Ashmawy Ali)



a



b

Fig. 7 a) B.663; b) B.1502 (Photos: Aiman Ashmawy Ali)

3 m above the floor. The outer lines on the edge of the base are vertical while the inner ones are horizontal. The vertical text reads:



1- $\epsilon n \dot{h} t \ n \dot{t} r \ i m \ n \ k 3 \ n$

(which) a god lives on them to the spirit of...

¹⁴ RANKE, *PNI*, 144, no. 13.

¹⁵ For this title, see QUIRKE S., *Titles and Bureaux of Egypt 1850-1700 BC*, London 2004, 111–112; JONES, D., *An Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles, Epithets and Phrases of the Old Kingdom*, Volume 1, Oxford 2000, 496; WARD, W.A., *Index*



a



b

Fig. 8 a) B.193; b) B.192 (Photos: Aiman Ashmawy Ali)



($\dot{h} 3 t y$ -) $\epsilon M 3 \dot{h} s \ \dot{h} t p \ n b \ i m 3 \dot{h}$

Governor/Mayor Maheshotep¹⁴ owner of honour

The horizontal lines read:



1- $\dot{h} 3 t y$ - $\epsilon M 3 \dot{h} s 3$

Governor/Mayor¹⁵ Mahes...

of Egyptian Administrative and Religious Titles of the Middle Kingdom. With a Glossary of Words and Phrases Used, Beirut, American University of Beirut, 1982, 104–105, no. 864. For a study of the sA sign, see IVERSEN, E., The Hieroglyph, *JEA* 42 (1956), 54–57.



M3hs htp nb im3h

Maheshotep owner of honour

(b/w photo in BAKR, BRANDL and KALLONIATIS (eds.), *Egyptian Antiquities from the Eastern Nile Delta* (MIN 2), Fig. 16).

B.663 (Fig. 7a)

Limestone, 12.0 cm x 9.0 cm x 4.0 cm

Middle Kingdom

Base of a statue, which was found in the debris south of the building complex about 3 m above the ground. Only the feet are preserved, in front of which reads a horizontal line of hieroglyphs:



Nbt pr hrt ib m3c(t) hrw

Mistress of the house Khert ib¹⁶ justified

Traces of fire are still found on the base.

The shape of the base indicates that this was part of a group statue. (b/w photo in BAKR, BRANDL and KALLONIATIS (eds.), *Egyptian Antiquities from the Eastern Nile Delta* (MIN 2), Fig. 13).

B.664 (Fig. 1b)

Limestone, 43.0 cm x 26.0 cm x 25.0 cm

Middle Kingdom

Naos, found in the debris south of the building complex about 2.5 m above the ground.

B.1502 (Fig. 7b)

Black granite, 16.0 cm long

Stone piece with part of the cartouche of king Senusert found in the debris west of the magazines area: s3 R^c Ws(r). t s n

General comment

The parts of the statues and statuettes discussed here are dated stratigraphically to the Middle

Kingdom. In addition, the facial characteristics including the large projecting ears placed high, the prominent chin, and the round face date these objects stylistically to the late Middle Kingdom, probably the time of Senusert III, Amenemhet III or later. The facial characteristics of Senusert III and Amenemhet III also inspired the artists of the 13th dynasty.¹⁷

The preserved part of B.357 with its head cloth is very similar to the head in the Boston museum attributed to Senusert III or Amenemhet III.¹⁸

The beauty spot on the chin of Tell Basta 191 is rare in Egyptian art. To my knowledge, no parallel examples are known. It gives the statue a touch of realism. The deepness in the middle of the chin indicates clearly that it is a beauty spot, which is completely different from the double lobed chin as known from a statue of Senusert I.¹⁹

It is difficult to attribute B.191 to a specific lady at Tell Basta. However, it is worthy to note that ladies during that period played a very important role in the region. Van Siclen considered one of them –lady Nefrt– to be one of the capable women often encountered in Egyptian history, who outlived her spouse and children. He attributed her one of the 6 stone tombs in the cemetery of the elite at Tell Basta, tomb no. 2.²⁰ Such a character should have possessed several statues. The building complex was destroyed at the beginning of the 15th Dynasty.²¹ The area was abandoned and never used for the same function, rather it was used as a burial ground. Several SIP tombs were discovered at the area; some of them contained donkey burials or burials of donkey skulls²² besides early New Kingdom stele,²³ which indicate that the area was used as a burial ground still in the 18th Dynasty. This explains the height of the debris at the site, since no action was taken to clean or remove the debris in order to erect new buildings. It also explains the discovery of the objects at different levels in the debris.

As mentioned, the function of the building cannot be determined only from its architectural plan,

¹⁶ RANKE, *PNI*, 273 no. 17.

¹⁷ See STEINDORFF, G., A portrait-statue of Sesostris III, *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 3 (1940), 48, 50; ALDRED, C., Some Royal Portraits of the Middle Kingdom in Ancient Egypt, *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 3 (1970), 41–45, 48; ALDRED, C., *Egyptian Art*, New York 1985, 137–138

¹⁸ DUNHAM, D., An Egyptian portrait head of the XII dynasty, *BMEF* 26 (1928), 61, figs. 5–8.

¹⁹ ALDRED, C., *Middle Kingdom Art in Ancient Egypt* 2300–1590 B.C., London 1950, 40, Fig. 25.

²⁰ VAN SICLEN III, C.C., *The Mayors of Basta in the Middle Kingdom*, Akten des vierten Internationalen Ägyptologenkongresses München 1985, BSAK 4, Hamburg 1990, 192.

²¹ FARID, *ASAE* 58 (1964), 95; VAN SICLEN III, C.C., The City of Basta, an Interim Report, *NARCE* 128 (1984), 35.

²² BAKR, M.I., *Tell Basta*, Vol. I, Cairo 1992, 20.

²³ ASHMAWY A.A., An unpublished stele from Tell Basta, *BIFAO* 109, 2010, 17–22.

but also from the small objects discovered in it. It is noticeable here that all items represent objects used in temples or funerary architecture rather than in domestic buildings. The plan of the cemetery of the elite next to the building, and the fact that it was built in sequence and not cut into the ground make it difficult to accept a superstructure consisting of chapels as Van Siclen suggested.²⁴ It is possible that part of the building complex here

played the role of the tomb chapels, where funerary statues were placed and different funerary rituals were performed to the statues of the mayors buried in the nearby cemetery. This may also explain the presence of a female statue inside the building, since women did not own temple statues.²⁵ However, the building complex also comprised living facilities such as kitchens, magazines, living quarters for priests etc.

²⁴ VAN SICLEN III, C.C., *The Mayors of Basta in the Middle Kingdom*, BSAK 4, 1990, 189; ID., *The City of Basta*, an Interim Report, *NARCE* 128 (Winter 1984), 34.

²⁵ ROBINS G., "women" in: D.B. REDFORD (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford 2001, vol.3, 516.