

'Ain al Gadida 2006 Excavations

The 2006 excavation season at the site of 'Ain al-Gadida (Dakhleh Oasis Project site no. 31/405-N3-1) was carried out from 19 January to 2 February 2006. Previous work at the site included a preliminary survey of the site by the DOP in 1980 and 3 seasons of excavation between 1993 and 1995, directed by Kamel Bayumi of the local Coptic and Islamic Inspectorate. This excavation focused on the Southern part (area A on the map) of the main hill of the site, which also extends to include at least three additional mounds to the South (areas C-E) and one mound to the North-East (area F). In 2006 excavation at 'Ain al Gadida was resumed thanks to the funding provided by Columbia University and Professor Roger Bagnall.

The staff consisted of Kamel Ahmed Bayumi, director; Nicola Aravecchia, archaeological field director; Anna Boozer, senior archaeologist; Francesco Meo, archaeologist; Gillian Pyke, archaeologist and ceramicist; Angela Cervi, registrar; Marina Nuovo, assistant registrar; Fabio Congedo, Valentino de Santis, topographers; Johannes Walter, archaeobotanist; Silviu Angel, photographer. The inspectors were Sahar Habeb Farid and Mahmoud Mohamed Massoud of the local Coptic and Islamic Inspectorate.

Before the beginning of the excavation season an absolute elevation was taken for the site using a differential GPS system. This allowed for a precise calculation of the elevations for all of the different features that were uncovered and recorded.

On the first day of excavation a surface survey was conducted in order to expose the tops of the walls that were visible at ground level throughout the main hill. The topographers drew all the exposed features of the main hill and also surveyed the four other mounds, producing a general map of the site, which included also the rooms excavated in the 1990's.

The excavations were carried out in the northern part of the main hill (area B) in three different sectors. Three interconnected rooms (B1-B3) were excavated to floor level (B1) and gebel (B2-B3) in the north west part. Room B1 was identified as a courtyard, onto which rooms B2-B3 opened along the south side, as well as two unexcavated rooms opening onto the courtyard from the north side. On the south west corner of room B1 a well-preserved mud hearth was found with a high density of ash and charcoal. South west of rooms B1-B3 another room (B4) was excavated to gebel. The large quantity of ash, charcoal, and pottery sherds found during the excavation suggests that the room was used as a dump at some point. Soil samples were collected from secure contexts in these four rooms for archaeobotanical analysis, which will hopefully provide more information on patterns of food consumption at the site in antiquity. After rooms 1-4 were excavated to gebel or floor level, excavation focused on room B5. Windblown sand was removed and a roof and wall collapse was revealed, which will be excavated during the next field season. It was possible to identify the function of this room as a church, with one semicircular apse and a *pastophorion*. Room B5 is connected to room A46, which is a large gathering hall that was excavated in 1994. The irregular layout of the walls of room B5 and the clear signs of remodeling to its original features reveal different architectural phases, which will be investigated further in coming seasons.

In addition to the excavation of the above-mentioned rooms, intensive documentation took place in area A, excavated by the SCA in the 1990's. This provided a wealth of information about the architecture of the settlement and enables comparative analysis with the buildings newly excavated. Six of the rooms were chosen for their particular architectural interest; all their features were fully recorded, documented, and photographed. Most rooms in area A seemed to be largely utilitarian in

nature, such as magazines for the storage of food and a very large kitchen. Room A46, the large gathering hall connected to room B5, was also fully recorded alongside the excavation of the church. Furthermore, an architectural survey was conducted in 13 additional rooms in area A, all of which were cleared of windblown sand during the season. In three instances, the clearance was halted due to the presence of archaeological deposits; their future excavation will undoubtedly provide important information about material culture and stratigraphy of the site.

The small finds that were found and collected throughout the excavation season include eight ostraca (Coptic and Greek), several coins, fragments of bracelets, beads, and glass fragments, which were collected on the field and subsequently sorted, cleaned, numbered, recorded, and their analysis begun.

A large quantity of fragments of pottery was collected both in the rooms excavated in area B and during the clearance of the rooms in area A. The sherds found in the rooms of area A, already excavated by the SCA, were scanned, and only vessels with complete or long profiles were selected for further recording. In the case of room 25, all the diagnostic sherds were kept, since it seems likely that the floor was never reached and the pottery came from a disturbed floor context. A strategy of full recording was begun in the newly excavated area, where the majority of ceramic material derived from secure contexts. The two excavated areas in the north west part of the settlement both contained significant deposits yielding valuable information about the ceramic repertoire of 'Ain al-Gadida. Due to time constraints it was only possible to complete the initial gross quantification of the excavated contexts; the body sherds were discarded and the diagnostic sherds kept for further analysis. A representative sample of the best preserved examples of the general form and fabric groups was drawn and photographed.

On the last day of excavation, a geomagnetic surveyor visited the site and conducted a surface survey with a magnetometer, which allowed for the identification of 6 anomalies in the ground in the area south of the main hill. Two more anomalies were identified, one on the southeastern hill and another north of rooms B1-3 on the main hill. Such anomalies are perhaps to be related to the presence of kilns or ovens and could be the object of testing in future excavation seasons.

Bibliography

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Fig. 1: rooms B1-B3, view from NW.



Fig. 2: room B4, view from NE.



Fig. 3: church (B5) and adjacent room to the north (A46), view from E.



Fig. 4: general view of area A from the N.