

# Excavating Ancient Egypt





ARCHAEOLOGICAL LIVES

**Excavating Ancient Egypt**  
Fifty Years of Archaeological  
Memories

Jeffrey Spencer

ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY



ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

13-14 Market Square

Bicester

Oxfordshire OX26 6AD

United Kingdom

[www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

ISBN 978-1-80583-127-3

ISBN 978-1-80583-128-0 (e-Pdf)

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Front cover: Site of the Late Dynastic temple at El-Ashmunein in 1980

Back cover: Jeffrey and Patricia Spencer on a chilly day at Tell el-Balamun. Photo: M.A. Leahy.

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Map showing the sites of work and towns mentioned in this book

# Preface

This book is not intended to be a biography, but simply a record of my involvement with the archaeology of Egypt over five decades. As such, it provides an opportunity for discussion of many aspects of living and working in that land that are not covered in the academic publications of the fieldwork projects I directed.

It was not until 1967 that I decided to pursue a career in Egyptology. This presented certain problems, since I had already chosen to follow a science-based curriculum for my A-Level examinations, rather than those subjects in the humanities that universities usually expected as a precursor to the study of archaeology. But subsequently I have found a science background of considerable value in my chosen career. Nevertheless, thanks to the enlightened attitude of Professor H.W. Fairman, I was accepted to study Oriental Studies (Egyptian) at the University of Liverpool. This four-year course led in due course to a B.A. degree and I remained at Liverpool to complete a doctorate on the topic of ancient Egyptian brick architecture. I had long been aware of Egyptology because of my father's employment at the Manchester University Museum, which holds an extensive Egyptian collection. As Technician, a role which combined setting up displays, photography and conservation, he worked extensively with the Egyptian antiquities.

The following chapters begin with my first participation in archaeology in Egypt, as a student, and then the story of how the Egyptian Department of the British Museum, where I gained employment, was persuaded to initiate field projects in Egypt. The first wholly British Museum excavation in the Nile Valley since the work of Wallis Budge in the Sudan in 1903 was begun at the site of El-Ashmunein (Roman Hermopolis Magna) in 1980. This initiative prompted a diversification of British fieldwork in Egypt, with expeditions being organized from several universities. It also encouraged other Departments of the British Museum to develop projects in the countries relevant to their collections.

The names of certain official bodies, too long for constant repetition, have been given abbreviations noted at the first occurrence. These include the Egypt Exploration Society (EES) and the Supreme Council for Antiquities (SCA), later subsumed into the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MoTA). I am grateful to the Egypt Exploration Society for permission to use the images on pages 99 and 105, and to Penelope Wilson of the University of Durham for those on pages 78–79. Unless otherwise stated in the caption, all other photographs were taken by the author or by Patricia Spencer.

In common with all foreign archaeological missions in Egypt, we operated under permits kindly granted by the Egyptian Supreme Council for Antiquities, and the initiation and progress of the fieldwork was aided by many individuals, to whom acknowledgement is due. First among these is Vivian Davies, without whose involvement the British Museum fieldwork would never have begun. The epigraphic project of 1976–79 and the excavation at El-Ashmunein were set up with the help of Harry James and Aly el-Khouli. In later years we received assistance in Cairo from Magdy el-Ghandour, Faten Saleh, Mohamed Abdel Halim Rizq, Sabry Abdel Aziz Khater and Mohamed Abdel Maksoud; at El-Ashmunein from Mahmud Hamza, Samir Anis, Mohamed Kamal Ibrahim, Hisham Ahmed Fahid, Ashraf el-Sayed Mahmud and the local guards of the SCA Rest-House, Ahmed Taher and Mamduah Rifai; in Kafr es-

Sheikh from Mohamed Abdel Rafea; in El-Mansura and at Tell el-Balamun from Ahmed el-Sourougi, Mohamed Abdel Fatah, Neguib Nur, Elsayed el-Talhawy, Atef Abu Dahap, Yasser el-Sayed el-Gamal, Hamdi Abdel Azim, Ahmed Rabia, Saad el-Sayed Mansur and Mahmud Ragab Aid Rifai. At Tell el-Balamun we enjoyed the longstanding assistance of our landlord, Gomaa Abbas, and his family. In 2002 Ahmed Abbas allowed us to use a house he owned at Tell Belim rent-free, and Mohamed Radwan provided rented accommodation at Tell Buweib. Our excavations could not have proceeded without the workers we recruited at El-Ashmunein and in the Delta, who swiftly acquired the necessary skills for archaeology. I am also grateful to Manfred Bietak, Eva Lange-Athinodorou and the late Ross Thomas for the opportunity to join the excavations at Tell ed-Daba, Tell Basta and Naukratis respectively. The quotes in the Introduction are from the 1884 *Journal* of Flinders Petrie (kept at University College London) and the Naukratis diaries of D.G. Hogarth (published by myself and Valerie Smallwood for the British Museum Naukratis online Research Catalogue). Quotes in the main text are from our own expedition diaries, kept by my wife, Patricia, who acted as co-director of the work in the field and was responsible for much of the site-recording and interpretation. She has also read through this entire book, adding valuable suggestions and correcting numerous typographic errors. I also wish to thank the two peer-reviewers for their helpful comments. Finally, I am grateful to Archaeopress for agreeing to publish this book.

# Introduction

Egyptology is a subject more than two centuries old. The *savants* accompanying the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt in 1798 began the serious collection of information on ancient and contemporary features of the country, subsequently published in the splendid volumes of the *Déscription de l'Égypte* (1810–28). Antiquities were collected, some of which came in due course to the British Museum, including the Rosetta Stone that was to inspire efforts to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs, so brilliantly achieved by Jean-François Champollion. At this point the study of texts was more scientific than any investigation of the ancient sites in the Nile Valley. The most valuable aspects of the work of the French expedition, and later by that of Carl Richard Lepsius, appear in architectural plans and copies of inscriptions, not in the acquisition of moveable objects, which were casually removed from their contexts. Archaeology had yet to develop. Early excavation was centered on a search for museum-quality objects, not a quest for information. Perhaps a part of the problem in Egypt was the fact that the sites of initial attention were the wrong kind to promote the development of true archaeology. In the clearances of the great temples of Upper Egypt, the only objective was to remove all encumbrances and reveal the temple. On the desert, where the monuments were buried under wind-blown sand, it was again a matter of clearance, not an excavation. Work in the Valley of the Nile or in the Delta, where a different approach would be required, was almost non-existent. In the few places that were examined, such as the work of Mariette at Tanis, the operation was again simply to remove all the earth to reveal the inscribed stone blocks from the temple.

A change came about when Flinders Petrie, having completed his survey of the Giza pyramids, was commissioned by the Egypt Exploration Fund to excavate in the Delta, beginning at Tanis in 1884. He brought archaeological technique to the task, recording levels and the differing nature of fill, while taking care to recover small objects and to note their contexts. He was one of the very few individuals of the time to appreciate archaeological stratification, which he recorded in his work at the site of Naukratis. It was at this point that archaeology in Egypt, as opposed to mere object-collecting, really began. The continued recovery of information about ancient Egypt through the 20th century has been based on two processes: 1) the study and interpretation of ancient texts and of items of material culture, and 2) surveys and excavation. This book is concerned with the latter. In order to have contexted objects to study, someone has first to retrieve those items from the ground.

During an excavation in Egypt the primary focus of every day is the progress of the dig, but this activity exists within a context of living locally and interacting with people. The following chapters contain an account of this background, alongside a description of the principal discoveries made in our excavations. These anecdotes provide a more rounded view of what is involved in operating an excavation in Egypt, covering topics such as the variation of the weather, travel and accommodation, obtaining supplies and various administrative tasks. Most published academic reports contain no reference to these background activities, but some early excavators, such as Flinders Petrie and David Hogarth, documented them in diaries, extracts of which were sometimes published in more general books. The comments made by both of these excavators over a century ago bear an interesting similarity to our own experiences, partly due to their excavations at the time having been located in the Nile Delta, where much of our own work was located. Discussion of the weather, a common feature of

the diaries, concerns the climate of the Delta region with its distinct differences from that of southern Egypt. In the Spring months the days may vary widely from extreme heat to bitter cold. This is caused by the seasonal *khamsin* wind, which blows from the south and brings great heat and much dust from the desert. As long as it persists the heat continues to build over several days, then suddenly the gale may switch to the northwest and the temperature falls dramatically, followed by thunderstorms and torrential rain. As Petrie noted in his 1884 Journal:

April 3. Patter-patter-patter on the iron over head, such was the first sound this morning; the parching wind at 95° had – without changing its direction, W.S.W. – turned to a grizzly wet day with a leaden sky, such as would do credit to England in the end of October. There is a lull now & then, in which I look out round the corner of the doorway, and always see the same sight of an horizon vanishing into grey driving rain. The face of the country is shiney with water, & the ground of the rubbish mounds is greasy with slippery mud. Instead of 95° like yesterday, it is but 66° outside.

By contrast, Hogarth experienced extreme heat at Naukratis, also in April, and mentions the related emergence of a particularly annoying type of fly:

After cloudy night with S. wind, day of terrible heat ensued. Air from S.E. like a furnace blast, and as it died away about 3 p.m. myriads of tiny flies settled on everything & everybody. The air was like lead & work suffered (1903 diary, April 26).

The small flies he mentioned were called *hamoush* by our workmen. They always appeared on very hot days, drifting through the air in clouds, as noted by us at Tell el-Balamun on 12 April 1993:

Excavation continued. Hot, with many midges [*hamoush*]. PW & PAS went to Hyam Zaki's wedding party later.

Petrie's mention of 'slippery mud' is very familiar to us from rainy days in the Delta. Travelling by train, building or renting accommodation on site and coping with mosquitoes are other subjects documented by Petrie and Hogarth, and again their experiences show a similarity to our own. Overall there is a rich seam of stories connected with the practice of archaeology in Egypt.