

# The Middle Kingdom tombs of Asasif: work in the 2015/2016 season

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**Abstract:** In the third season of the Polish Asasif Project at the North Asasif Necropolis in West Thebes archaeological fieldwork concentrated on six of the Middle Kingdom rock-cut tombs: MMA 508/TT 311, MMA 509, MMA 512, MMA 514, MMA 515 and MMA 517/TT 240. The corridors and chambers were cleared and the architecture documented and restored. A surface survey was carried out on the slope. Of greatest interest among the finds are Middle Kingdom stonemason's tools and cartonnages from the Third Intermediate Period.

**Keywords:** West Thebes, North Asasif, Middle Kingdom, rock-cut tombs, Khety, Meru

Six Middle Kingdom funerary complexes: the tomb of Khety (MMA 508/TT 311), MMA 509, MMA 512, MMA 514, MMA 515 and the tomb of Meru (MMA 517/TT 240) were the focus of the Polish project working in the North Asasif Necropolis at West Thebes in the 2015/2016 season [Fig. 1]. Exploration and documentation work was undertaken on the slope and inside the funerary complexes. The

sandstone slabs in the main hall floor and the walls of the burial crypt in the tomb of Khety were restored. Studies on the Middle Kingdom tomb architecture were carried out and material discovered in this and the two earlier seasons were analyzed, especially the Eleventh Dynasty stonemason's tools and burial assemblages, textiles, as well as funerary equipment from the Third Intermediate Period.

## TOMB OF KHETY (MMA 508/TT 311)

Current work inside the tomb of the Treasurer Khety focused on documenting the painted decoration of the burial crypt and the fragments coming from the walls of the entrance corridor [Fig. 2 left]. The team restored the limestone sarcophagus of the owner and replaced limestone slabs

missing from the pavement in the entrance corridor.

Limited archaeological fieldwork encompassed a survey of the eastern part of the courtyard. Artifacts collected from this area represented mainly Eleventh Dynasty funerary equipment, among them wooden

model fragments and a broken clay tray. In the entrance corridor, the bedding of the sandstone pavement was tested in the gaps left by the missing slabs, removed probably either by thieves or by modern explorers. In all cases crushed limestone was found to be the material used to level the irregular bedrock surface.<sup>1</sup>

The “false burial crypt” at the back of the cult chapel continued to be explored. The rock debris filling the western part of the chamber contained inscribed blocks from the limestone sarcophagus of Khety and fragments of a carefully cut limestone slab, which had been used to block the entrance to the next sloping passage after the funeral.<sup>2</sup>

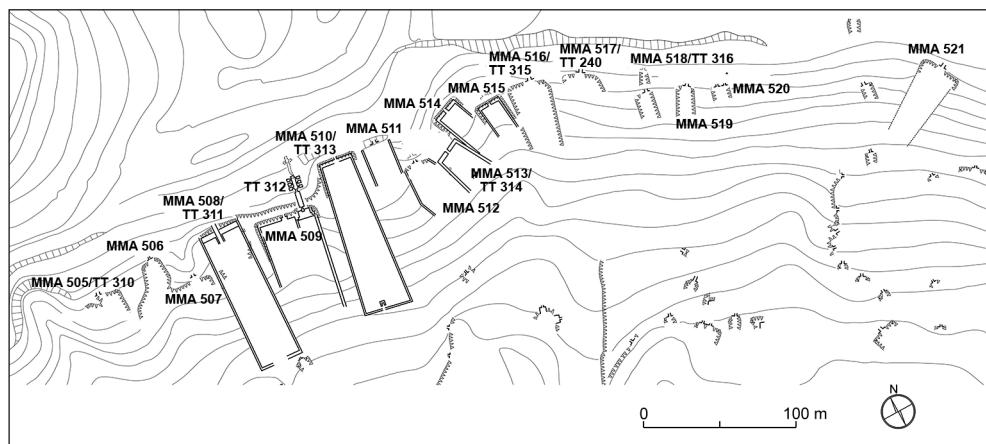


Fig. 1. Tombs in the North Asasif necropolis (Plan K. Andraka)

### Team

*Dates of work:* 16 November 2015–9 March 2016 (with a break between 17 December 2015 and 15 February 2016)

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<sup>1</sup> For a similar layer of powdered limestone found in tomb MMA 1152 at Sheikh Abd el-Gurna, see Chudzik 2013: 195.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with the blocked entrance to the burial crypt in the unfinished royal mortuary complex in the South Valley (Mond 1905: 78).

In addition, diverse material from different periods was found in the rubble inside the false burial chamber. Fragments of wooden arrows with copper heads and flint edges represented the Middle Kingdom funerary

equipment (see Winlock 1942: 127, Pl. 20; Hayes 1968: 279–280, Fig. 182) [*Fig. 2* right]. There were also painted cartonnages dating from the Third Intermediate Period (Chudzik 2016: 295).

## TOMB MMA 509

In tomb MMA 509, corridors and chambers were examined beyond the stone wall standing at the end of the first part of the entrance corridor, where sandstone and limestone floor slabs were discovered in the 2013/2014 season (Chudzik 2015: 240).

A doorway in the center of the mud-brick façade led to a long lofty corridor that was aligned with the north–south axis of the tomb. Its width and height gradually decreased approximately 15 m from the entrance. The second part of the corridor, which is over 20 m long, led to a square chamber already deep in the rock, functioning probably as a funerary cult chapel [*Fig. 3*]. The floor in the corridor and chapel was covered with mud mortar. The north wall of the chapel featured a doorway to another chamber. The entrance, situated on the axis of the main corridor, was carved near the southeastern corner of the room. Two entrances led to corridors sloping down diagonally in the northern and northeastern parts of the room. The entrance in the north wall, located on the axis of the complex, was surmounted by an arch built of mud-bricks and plastered with mud. A gap in the rock in the southern part of the west wall, level with the rock floor, is big enough to have accommodated a coffin in ancient times. A square chamber was carved at the end of each corridor. None

of these rooms contained any material to indicate their function; nevertheless, their role as burial chambers can hardly be denied.

Rock debris filled both sides of the cult chapel, reaching more than 2 m in height in the eastern part of the chapel. It was explored down to the Middle Kingdom mud floor, revealing no stratigraphy and yielding large quantities of potsheards, mud stoppers, textiles, wooden fragments of coffins and chests, faience and carnelian beads [*Fig. 5* top left], mud-bricks and fragments of high quality limestone blocks with relief decoration and red-ink painting.<sup>3</sup> Human mummies [*Fig. 4*] and animal remains, including cattle skulls and forelegs, a goat skull and fragments of a neurocranium from a catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*) were unearthed.<sup>4</sup> Excavations in the cult chapel uncovered some elements of the Middle Kingdom burial assemblages, such as a fragment of a clay tray and wooden model remains. Additionally, three stone hammers made of silicified limestone (see Seton-Karr 1905: 176, Pls I, II, IV–VI, VIII; Petrie 1917: 46, Pl. LIII [83–86]; Clarke and Engelbach 1990: 224, Fig. 266; Arnold 1991: 258–262, Figs 6.12, 6.13) [*Fig. 5* bottom] and a fine limestone plumb-bob(?) were discovered. Deserving the most attention were a small cup made

<sup>3</sup> The red-ink painted blocks may have come from the adjacent tomb of vizier Nespakashuti. For similar blocks, see Winlock 1923: Fig. 17 [top]; Pischikova 1998: 93, 96.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Urszula Iwaszczuk for identifying the faunal remains.



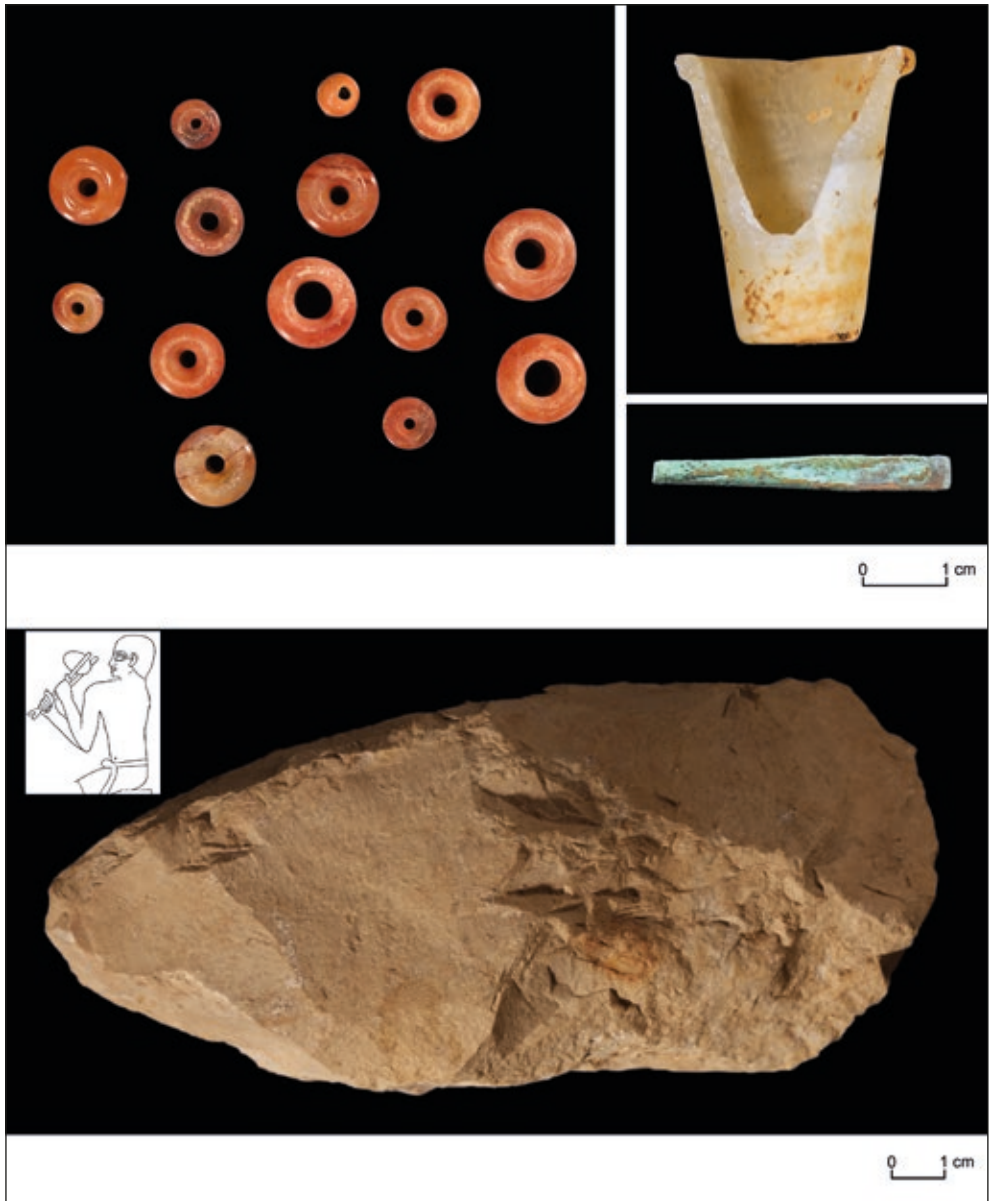
Fig. 2. Tomb of Khety: left, fragment with a representation of the mummy of Khety from the west wall of the entrance passage; right, Middle Kingdom wooden arrows: an arrowhead (a) and an arrow nick (b) (Photos M. Jawornicki)



Fig. 3. Cult chapel inside tomb MMA 509 (Photo P. Chudzik)



Fig. 4. One of the mummies found in the cult chapel of the funerary complex MMA 509 (Photo M. Jawornicki)



*Fig. 5. Finds from tomb MMA 509 (clockwise from bottom): limestone hammer head (inset, drawing of a sculptor with a stone hammer); set of beads made of carnelian; small travertine cup; miniature copper chisel, possibly of Middle Kingdom date (Photos M. Jawornicki; drawing P. Chudzick after Wild 1966: Pl. CLXXIII)*

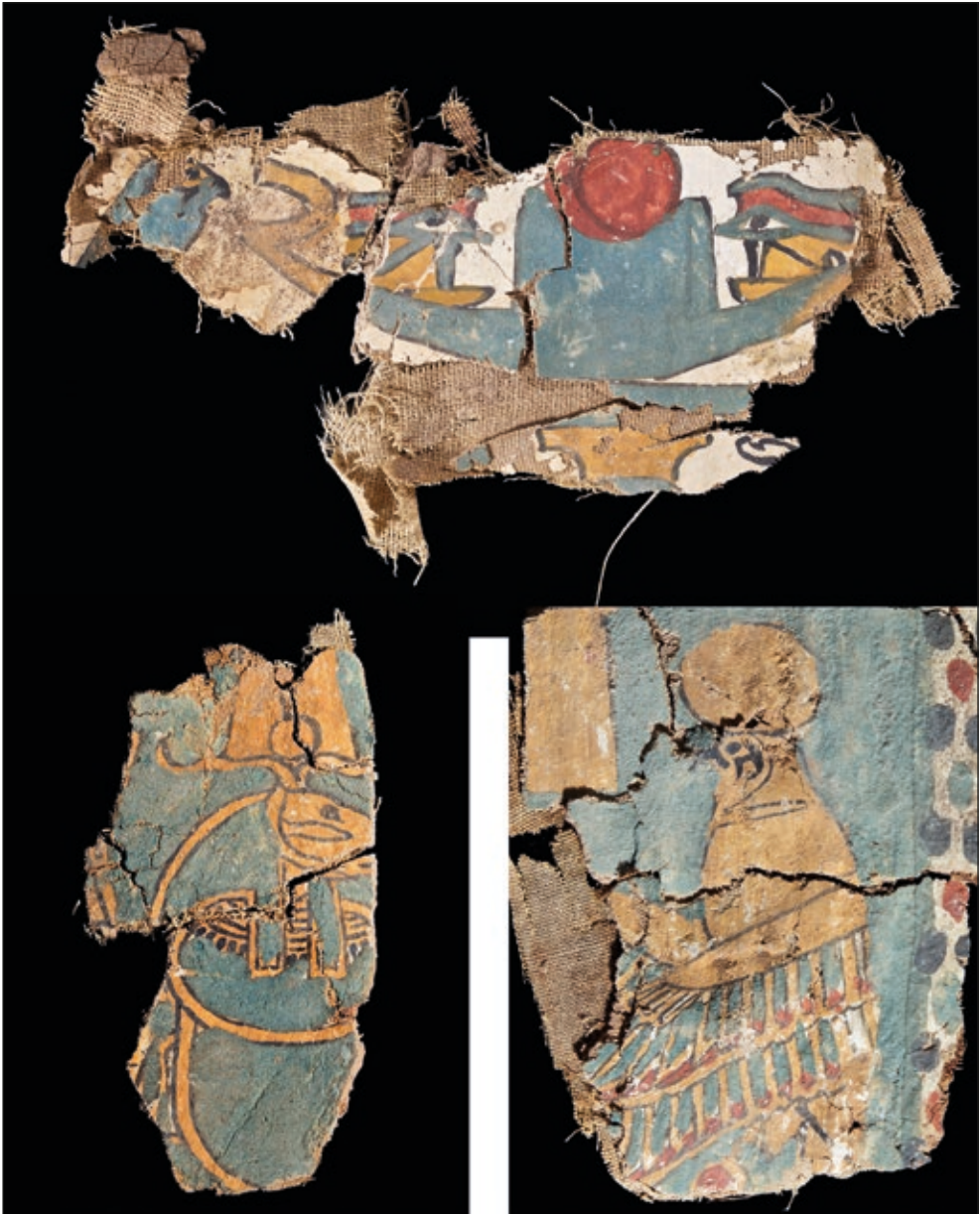


Fig. 6. Cartonnages from tomb MMA 509: top, God Ra on the solar bark with wadjet eyes, Third Intermediate Period; bottom left, God Ra in ram-headed scarab form, Twenty-second Dynasty; right, falcon with the solar disc on its head clutching a shen symbol in its claws, Twenty-second Dynasty (Photos M. Jawornicki)

of travertine [*Fig. 5* top right] and funerary equipment, mainly clay ushabti and finely decorated fragments of cartonnages with representations of the deceased and the underworld deities, dated mostly to the Twenty-second Dynasty [*Fig. 6*].<sup>5</sup>

The fill cleared from the chamber back of the cult chapel was 0.20 m high by the entrance, rising to 0.40 m at the highest

point in the northeastern part of the room. A small copper chisel [*Fig. 5* center right] was discovered among the human and animal remains, textiles and wooden items. This miniature object, measuring 3.60 cm in length, is probably a chisel model from the same set as the small travertine cup found in the cult chapel.<sup>6</sup> Both can be dated to the Middle Kingdom.

## TOMB MMA 512

In the funerary complex of MMA 512, explored already in an earlier season (Chudzik 2015: 241–243), the wall of the courtyard in its eastern part and the entrance corridor were now documented. A significant part of the entrance

corridor is still filled with rock debris and the rock ceiling threatens to collapse at any moment. Measurements taken this season will help to design a proper wooden scaffolding to ensure the safety of future work.

## TOMB MMA 514

The doorway in the center of the mud-brick façade leads to a long and lofty corridor. A survey of the tomb revealed three shaft tombs, some still filled with rubble, in the floor of the main passage. Besides, a niche with a shaft in its floor can be seen about 5 m from the corridor entrance. At the end of the corridor is a large and irregular chamber with a rectangular floor, possibly intended as a funerary cult chapel. An irregular niche was carved in the north wall and another in the western part of the room. An entrance to a passage sloping down diagonally, situated in the east wall of the chapel, led eastwards to the burial crypt. A low wall, 0.75 m high, preserved at the entrance to

the chamber, was built of mud-bricks to seal the crypt after the funeral [*Fig. 7*].

The burial chamber proved empty, but artifacts were found in the entrance corridor and chapel. These included funerary equipment from the Middle Kingdom (fragment of a round clay tray with representations of cattle legs and ribs, fragments of wooden models) and the Third Intermediate Period (cartonnages and clay ushabti figurines [*Fig. 8*]) as well as animal bones, textiles, wooden fragments of coffins and pottery vessels.

More material from the Third Intermediate Period (wooden fragments of coffins and chests, cartonnages, textiles and

<sup>5</sup> For a similar decoration style, see the outer-coffin of Djedamenuifankh in the British Museum collection (EA 29577) (Budge 1924: 121–122; Dawson and Gray 1968: 21; Andrews 1998: 56–57).

<sup>6</sup> For models of tools from Thebes, see Petrie 1917: 20, Pl. XXI [21, 22]; Winlock 1924: 16, deposit from the Temple of Hatshepsut; Hayes 1968: 287–292, Figs 189–192; Arnold 1981: 52ff., especially 64, Pl. 88c, objects from the tomb of Kemsit.

pottery) came from the fill in the western part of the courtyard in front of the entrance to an associated tomb MMA 514a. The reversed stratigraphy of this fill suggests that it may have been thrown out from the tomb. A handmade ushabti deserves particular attention (see Niwiński 1985: Pl. 31a). It was made of clay and painted blue in imitation of faience [Fig. 8 top

right]. A similar figurine was discovered in this tomb in the 2013/2014 season [Fig. 8 top left].



Fig. 7. Mud-brick wall at the entrance to the burial crypt in tomb MMA 514 (Photo P. Chudzik)

Fig. 8. Finds from funerary complex MMA 514: top, clay ushabtis uncovered in front of the entrance to tomb MMA 514a; bottom, decorated cartonnage from the entrance corridor (Photos M. Jawornicki, P. Chudzik)





## TOMB MMA 515

An archaeological survey in the courtyard of funerary complex MMA 515 collected human and animal bones, textiles, coffin or chests remains, pottery sherds and fragments of funerary cones.

The open courtyard of the funerary complex was flanked by mud-brick walls on the east and west. The mud-brick façade in the northern part was much bigger than the other courtyard walls [Fig. 9]. In the center of the façade there is a doorway with a mud-brick doorstep [Fig. 10]. A mud-brick jamb survived in place on the left side of the doorway. A deep niche can be seen above the façade; it was completely empty. Comparable work at the funerary complex of Neférhotep (MMA 518/TT 316) a few years earlier resulted in the discovery of two tightly wrapped cubic statues (Winlock

1923: 19–20, Figs 13–14; 1942: 71–72, Pl. 35). Herbert E. Winlock suggested that a secret statue chamber cut in the mountain above the façade had served as a *ka*-chapel.<sup>7</sup>

Leading into the tomb was a corridor that opened into a square rock-cut chamber. About 1.50 m from the tomb doorway there was a niche cut on the left side of the corridor, one meter above the floor level.

The chamber at the end of the corridor probably functioned as a cult chapel. There is a very deep niche or another corridor, which had never been finished, in its north wall, on the main hall axis. A dromos is located in the floor in the southwestern part of the cult chamber. The entrance of a sloping passage opens in its bottom. The corridor leads down westwards to a small square chamber. Another sloping



Fig. 9. Mud-brick façade of tomb MMA 515; note deep niche above the façade (Photo P. Chudzik)

<sup>7</sup> For similar statue chapels above the façade, see Davies 1913: 282, Pl. XLIX; Dorman 1988: 91–92, Pls 17–19.

passage opens in the western part of the floor of this chamber. At the end of the corridor there is a burial crypt. In Middle Kingdom times, the doorway to the burial chamber was closed with a mud-brick wall. The lowest courses of this wall have been preserved. An undecorated sarcophagus, similar to that of Meru (MMA 517/TT 240) (Soliman 2009: 102; Chudzik 2016: 299, Fig. 14) was carved in the floor in the eastern part of the chamber.

Exploration work concentrated on clearing the mud-brick walls of the courtyard and façade, as well as the entrance corridor and chapel. A deposit of funerary cones of a Middle Kingdom date was found in the eastern corner of the façade [Fig. 11]. The set consisted of 58 handmade cones,

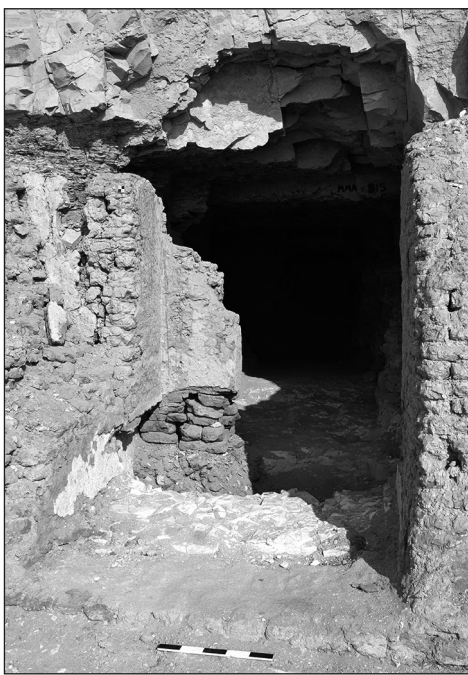


Fig. 10. Doorway with mud-brick doorstep, tomb MMA 515 (Photo P. Chudzik)

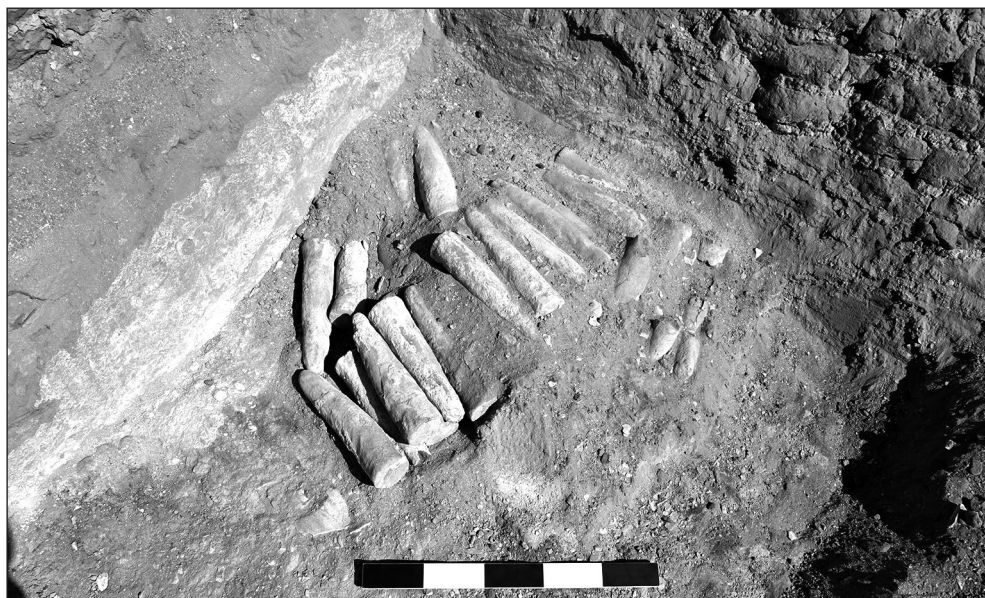


Fig. 11. Deposit of funerary cones in the eastern corner of the façade of funerary complex MMA 515 (Photo P. Chudzik)

each 28–32 cm long and 6.5–7.5 cm in diameter.

Terracotta cones used to be painted red and then partly white. Fragments of this kind were collected from the surface of the courtyard. Funerary cones still in place were discovered by Herbert E. Winlock in two rows above the rock façade of a Middle Kingdom tomb under the avenue leading to the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari

(Winlock 1928: 6–7, Figs 4–5). Terracotta cone friezes are attested tentatively in some New Kingdom Theban tomb wall scenes (see Davies 1938: 36–38, Figs 2–4, 8, 14). Cones seem to have been brought to the tomb and painted on the spot as implied by marks of red paint on the white plaster of the façade. However, the cones from the deposit, which were not decorated, seem not to have been placed in the brick façade.

## TOMB OF MERU (MMA 517/TT 240)

Study of the burial crypt decoration in the tomb of Meru was the prime objective of the 2015/2016 season [Fig. 12]. In addition, an archaeological survey was resumed on the slope in front of the tomb.

A terracotta figurine fragment was discovered during the survey, approximately 30 m away from the entrance to the tomb.

The decorative pattern covering the whole surface of this figurine is fairly uncharacteristic: short and irregular shallow curved lines made with a sharp tool [Fig. 13]. The right leg is placed slightly ahead of the other. Research so far has failed to identify the object conclusively. It is most likely an image of a bird, which is suggested



Fig. 12. False door, offerings and offering list on the east wall of the burial chamber of Meru (MMA 517) (Photo P. Chudzik)

by its profiled body, the upper parts of legs and a big part of the left wing. The broad base of the neck, the wing aligned close to the body and the legs, which are thinner at the bottom and thicker in the upper part, suggesting plumage, could point to a falcon representation. The figurine was made probably in the Hellenistic or Roman period (for similar decoration, see Breccia 1934: Pl. LXXII [370], CX [634]), nevertheless, it is also possible that it is of modern date.

Fig. 13. *Fragmentary terracotta figurine of a bird found in the courtyard of the funerary complex of Meru (Photo M. Jawornicki)*



## CONCLUSIONS

Summing up the third season of archaeological exploration by the Polish Asasif Project, one should point out the importance of discoveries made in the funerary complex MMA 509, where the finds included Eleventh Dynasty stonemason's tools and miniature objects, possibly from a deposit, as well as finely decorated cartonnages from the Twenty-second Dynasty.

From an architectural point of view, all of the funerary complexes examined in the 2015/2016 season represented the corridor tomb of type IIa (Arnold 1971: 43–46). Recorded finds prove a reuse of the Middle Kingdom tombs from the North Asasif Necropolis in the Third Intermediate Period.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On behalf of the Asasif Project team, I would like to express our thanks to the

authorities of the Ministry of Antiquities, especially Dr. Mohamed Ismail Khaled and Mr. Hany Abu Elazm, for their generous assistance and efforts beyond the call of duty in making the fieldwork possible. I would like also to thank the SCA inspectors for their help throughout the course of our work.

The season was made possible by funds from the University of Wrocław and from private sponsors. I am grateful to the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw for support of the fieldwork in Egypt, and especially to Dr. Zbigniew E. Szafrński heading the Polish–Egyptian Archaeological and Conservation Mission to the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, under the auspices of which the Asasif Project research is currently conducted.

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