

To Abydos and Back: A Conservator's Travelogue

In March, Suzanne Davis and I traveled to Cairo, Abydos, and Luxor, Egypt, on behalf of the University of Michigan's Middle Cemetery Project. During this short but productive trip, I attended a meeting with Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) officials regarding the site management plan and Visitors Center for Abydos. In response to a new emphasis in the SCA on the importance of foreign professionals providing training opportunities for Egyptian colleagues, Suzanne and I also participated in team-teaching a three-day field seminar with our colleagues from the Institute of Fine Arts at the site dig house, attended by fifteen Egyptian Inspectors and Conservators of Sohag Province. Finally, Suzanne was able to see firsthand the categories and conditions of sites, artifacts, and storage at Abydos and throughout Egypt, as well as to meet with conservators "in country" to discuss conservation strategies and supply sources. These experiences will be an invaluable background as we plan conservation facilities for the next excavation season of the Project in 2006.

Janet Richards, Associate Curator for Dynastic Egypt; Director, Abydos Middle Cemetery Project

My recent trip to Egypt began on March 14 when I joined the Kelsey's Associate Curator for Dynastic Egypt Janet Richards in Cairo. The primary purpose for our trip was to teach a special workshop at the site of Abydos, in southern Egypt, where Janet directs the Middle Cemetery Project, and to assess conservation needs at the site and supply sources in Egypt. The workshop, held for archaeological Inspectors in the Sohag Province where Abydos is located, would be three days long, with two days devoted to the history and archaeology of the site and one day devoted to archaeological conservation. We envisioned this workshop as the beginning of a program of ongoing activities at Abydos that will help engage local site inspectors as well as encourage collaboration between local Egyptian archaeologists and conservators and their foreign counterparts working in the area.

We began in Cairo, however; and on the first evening of the trip, Janet and I walked through the green, leafy Cairo neighborhood of Zamalek, passing lovely old villas, to our dinner destination, the palatial courtyard of the Cairo Marriot. Surrounded by beautiful Islamic architecture, I enjoyed the novelty of comfortable outdoor dining at night,

in March, the Michigan snow already forgotten.

The next day I had my first experience of the truly incredible preservation made possible by Egypt's arid climate. Janet arranged for us to visit normally off-limit areas at both Giza and Saqqara. At both sites I saw fascinating things, on a monumental scale (the Great Pyramid at Giza) and on a minute scale (individual faience tiles still decorating a 3rd Dynasty royal tomb at Saqqara, 4,800 years after they were first installed). Our visit to Saqqara was especially satisfying; here we were accompanied on our roving by a bright young site inspector named Saleh Suleiman, who is pursuing his master's degree in Egyptology at Cairo University.

My second day in Cairo we had an appointment with Dr. Wafaa El Saddik, Director of the Egyptian Museum. Dr. El Saddik, one of the busiest women in Cairo, took the time to sit with us and discuss her work. Among the museum's many current projects are the creation and testing of a new artifact database and a revamping of all the exhibit labels. Dr. El Saddik also made it possible for me to meet with the museum's conservation staff. The conservation laboratory, recently renovated with support from the American Research Center in Egypt,

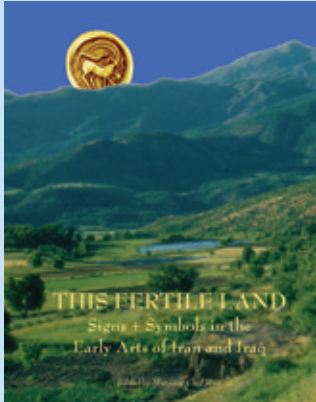


Participants in the three-day workshop for Supreme Council of Antiquities Inspectors and Conservators at Abydos, Egypt. Photographed in the Royal Wadi at Abydos.



Kelsey conservator Suzanne Davis demonstrating conservation materials to students in the workshop, held at the dig house.

Notes from the Acting Director



Cover of exhibition catalogue for "This Fertile Land."

Winter term has been exciting and full at the Kelsey Museum. We opened our special exhibition, "This Fertile Land: Signs + Symbols in the Early Arts of Iran and Iraq," with a guest lecture by Professor Denise Schmandt-Besserat of the University of Texas, Austin. Her lecture and the reception afterward were packed. Later in the term, Shaman Drum Bookstore hosted a book signing party featuring the exhibition catalogue. Current and former IPCAA students contributed chapters: Karen Johnson, Lori Khatchadourian, Hima Mallampati, Jane Rempel, and Drew Wilburn. History of Art student Anastasia Tsibulsky served as editorial assistant. As I write, public outreach efforts led by Todd Gerring are in full swing taking tours through the exhibition and gearing up for a special Family Day on "Arts of the Early Near East."

Internally, the Museum is planning our next exhibition, curated by Elaine Gazda along with a number of graduate students in IPCAA, Classical Studies, and History of Art: J. Matthew Harrington, Lydia Herring, Hima Mallampati, Adrian Ossi, Katherine Raff, and Benjamin Rubin. Tentatively titled "Reconstructing a Roman City: Pisidian Antioch in Asia Minor," it will be held off-site January 13 through February 10, 2006. The Media Union venue will offer a special opportunity for the Kelsey to develop cutting-edge digital technologies of public presentation.

Curators are striving to develop a coherent vision for the permanent displays destined for our New Wing, so generously funded by Edwin and Mary Meader. In addition, they are brainstorming about sources of potential support for the costs of installation, construction, furnishings, and related expenses, which will be significant. You will be reading more specifics about all this in Newsletters to come!

All staff are busy contributing to plans for the renovation of the current Kelsey structure, affectionately dubbed the Old Building. Once the New Wing is completed and its climate stabilized, the Old Building will be refurbished, with some changes to spatial configurations on the upper floors and the basement. At that time, the Tiffany window in the library will also be restored. Ultimately, the beautiful Old Building will retain many functions as a teaching, administrative, curatorial, public outreach, and ceremonial space (for receptions). The New Wing, with its state-of-the-art climate control, will house and display our antiquities collection.

An important project this year has been an external assessment and an internal self-evaluation preparatory to our bid for reaccreditation by the American Association of Museums (AAM). The external assessment was conducted in the fall by Rebecca Buck, Registrar of the Newark Museum and a highly experienced museum reviewer. In June we will begin the year-long accreditation process in earnest. Only about 7,500 of the 16,000 institutions in the United States calling themselves museums are accredited by the AAM. This designation is an important validation for an institution like the Kelsey, which seeks to maintain the highest standards as a lending and borrowing museum and to function as a teaching facility demonstrating best practices in museology.

We have embarked this year on a terrific project to upgrade our collections database to a fully illustrated, searchable online entity that will serve our multiple missions during building construction and into the future (see story on pages 4-5).

In the field, the Kelsey announces a new project in southern Armenia, cosponsored by the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences in Yerevan and led by Kelsey curators Sue Alcock and John Cherry, with the collaboration of Mkrtich Zardarian, Adam Hakopian, and Armen Tonikian from Armenia.

In closing, I want to take this occasion to thank Professor Richard Ford (retiring Director of the Museum of Anthropology) for his many years of energetic service to the Kelsey Museum. In the 1970s Dick was instrumental in helping then-Director John Pedley advocate in the College for the revitalization of the Museum. Since then, he has been a member of our Executive Committee on numerous rotations. His wisdom has always been right on target.

Margaret Cool Root, Acting Director

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has all the modern conveniences: excellent microscopes, a vacuum table, a de-ionizing system to purify the water, and many other conservation tools. We were able to see many current projects in the lab, including a large, painted wooden sarcophagus and a wood and leather chariot. I was very impressed by the dedication and professionalism of the conservators we met and was even more impressed when they began to tell us of their difficulty in finding many of the archival supplies that American conservators take for granted (like acid-free tissue!). For conservation supplies that are available in Cairo, several conservators wrote down store addresses so that we will be able to do in-country shopping for the Abydos project in the future.

After a beautiful train journey south along the Nile, we arrived at the site of Abydos on the third day of my visit. Janet and I spent the first few days here preparing materials for the workshop and coordinating our presentations with those of our co-presenters, Dr. Matthew Adams, Field Director for the Pennsylvania-Yale-New York University / Institute of Fine Arts (IFA) excavations, and Mr. Anthony Crosby, consulting conservator for the monumental mud-brick funerary enclosure of Khasekhemwy of the 2nd Dynasty (known locally as the "Shuneh"). Tony and I divided the conservation day of the course so that



Photo: S. Davis

Janet Richards with colleague Chief Inspector Dr. Mohammed Abdel Aziz and SCA Inspectors on the stairs to the Tomb of Thutmose III in the Valley of the Kings, Luxor.

Photo: J. Richards



Lotfi Hassan, conservator at Chicago House in Luxor, discusses conservation methods in Medinet Habu Temple with Suzanne Davis.

he presented his work on-site during the morning portion, and I gave a talk with slides and hands-on demonstrations at the dig house during the afternoon. Tony's work, which focuses on stabilizing a massive mud-brick structure, is fascinating. In his tour of the Shuneh we learned about structural problems and solutions for mud-brick buildings, evaluated past treatments, and saw the current work on several different areas of the Shuneh. For my part of the conservation day, I focused on basic preservation strategies with an emphasis on conservation planning before excavation, as well as conservation intervention in the field. My audience was very enthusiastic: of fifteen participants in the workshop, nine were conservators! The opportunity to participate in the course was a wonderful experience for me. I enjoyed meeting and talking with the Sohag conservators, and I received an expert introduction to the site of Abydos, complete with walking tours to demonstrate how the features of the majestic natural landscape function with the created landscape of the cemetery complex.

While at Abydos I was able to assist with conservation efforts for Dr. Adams's project. I advised faunal experts on the packing of some very important, very old, donkey skeletons (these were not just any donkeys; these were *royal* donkeys) using techniques I discussed in the workshop. I conferred on the excavation of objects in the field, picked up object-photography tips from the IFA project photographer, and was able to evaluate conservation facilities and artifact storage for the Middle Cemetery Project. I also had the painful experience of seeing firsthand one result of changing environmental conditions in Egypt, a beautifully painted limestone stela with salt crystals erupting in big patches all over its surface.

Our trip continued with a visit to

Luxor, where I was able to reconnect with a classmate from graduate school, Hiroko Kariya, who is now the conservator for the University of Chicago Oriental Institute's project at Luxor Temple. Hiroko showed me the project's impressive block-yard, where decontextualized sandstone blocks are sorted and grouped for ongoing reconstruction. She also showed me her many conservation treatment efforts. In the bright, hot sun she creates inventive temporary humidity chambers so that the ethyl silicate consolidant she uses to stabilize the crumbling sandstone will have the correct relative humidity to cure properly. Across the river, we had the great pleasure of a special tour of the Oriental Institute's work at the temple of Medinet Habu by Dr. Raymond Johnson, the Director of Chicago House. Ray showed us, among other things, the beautiful results of conservation efforts in the small 18th Dynasty Amun temple. We saw gorgeous painted walls and ceilings that were cleaned by the project's conservators, led by Mr. Lotfi Hassan. Lotfi also showed us the fitting of final small fragments for the newly reassembled colossal dyad of Thutmose III and Amun.

While in Luxor we also found time for visits to other sites, including the workmen's village of Deir el Medina, and the Valley of the Kings, to which we hiked following the steep mountain trail climbed each weekday by the workmen who built the Valley's tombs. Once in the Valley and visiting the tombs, I continued to be astonished by the beautifully preserved paint and relief carvings,

especially in my favorite of the tombs we visited, that of Thutmose III. Over Easter dinner at Chicago House, Lotfi and I continued our discussion of conservation issues in Egypt. He and Hiroko promised to put me in touch with conservation suppliers in Egypt and, on my next visit, to demonstrate for me some new techniques they'd developed in the field.

We returned to Cairo for the final few days of our time in Egypt. Here I had the opportunity to see conservation projects in Islamic Cairo and peeked through the windows at the new conservation lab in the charming sixteenth-century Gayer-Anderson House Museum. I was also able to take a field trip to the Fayum, where I visited Karanis, hometown of many Kelsey artifacts. Here I enjoyed seeing the remains of the Roman bath complex and the two Ptolemaic-Roman temples.

Now back in Michigan, I think that I could not have benefited from or enjoyed my trip more. Our workshop in Abydos was a success, and I am very happy to have met the conservators and inspectors who attended. As I told them, they are very lucky: although rising ground water is beginning to create many problems, Egypt still has the best preservation I have ever seen. I hope that my new friendships with other Egyptian and American conservators working in Egypt will last for years to come.

Suzanne Davis, Curator for Conservation

This trip was generously funded by the Kelsey Museum and the Department of Near Eastern Studies.



The view to Medinet Habu Temple from the workmen's cliff path to the Valley of the Kings.

Photo: J. Richards