

Where's the Beef? The Surprise of Tomb 49

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It was a long trench on the southern edge of the Tomb 16 complex, one of many disfiguring the elite cemetery. Convenient for storing our equipment on windy days, we had deliberately ignored it, considering it too looted to repay excavation. We were wrong.

It was the search for the crocodile's grave (Tomb 45) that brought us to the brink. Although that burial tricked us by turning up to the north of Tomb 43, exploration to the west and south (where we expected it to be) uncovered some interesting items, including several dozen clay beads and part of a rhomboid slate palette. In hopes of finding their place of origin, we hesitantly widened the explorations southward, but when the flint donkey and the calcite fish-tail knife amulet popped out from the surface gravels, we knew we were committed. Expanding further, quantities of cattle bones began to emerge, and now up against the edge of this trench, there was only one place left to go.

Photo: X. Droux



Fish-tail knife amulet.

With little enthusiasm for the task and only a week left in the season, we staked out a 2m test section in the middle of the 1.5m-wide furrow, joking with the dispirited workmen as they dug through the disturbed sand filling that it really wasn't a plundering pit, but a giant tomb containing 22 cows. This joke wasn't quite so funny when first the tips of the horns and then the entire heads of two cattle appeared, soon followed by their articu-



Tomb 49 so far. It's a whopper!



Photo: X. Droux

Just below the surface, the discovery of the donkey and the fish-tail amulet committed us to the quest.



Coming up with cattle at the western end.



Prime beef still on the hoof. A detailed look at Tomb 49.

lated, intertwined bodies as well as parts of more cattle to the west and east. Opening up to the west, we found the mostly in situ skeletal remains of four more cattle and finally the rounded end of this 1.55m wide-1.25m deep trench, which matched the surface indications exactly.

With only days remaining and already a lot of cattle to sort, if this trench, which now really was a tomb, was as large as the surface depression indicated, we knew we would not be able to finish it in time. Instead, we opted to search for the eastern end by clearing along one edge down only far enough to see the cutting in the chocolate layer. Taking it 2m at a time, it took us four rounds to get there, even farther than the surface led us to believe. The tomb (now called Tomb 49) is a whopping 13.5m long and up to 20 cattle may well be buried in it!

In all, we managed to excavate 5.5 m of this massive tomb, fully revealing six of its occupants and the rear parts of two others. Carefully arranged in two rows, their backs

were placed up against the walls, their legs toward the center overlapping with the animal buried opposite. All faced east, the head of one on the rump of another, although in two instances the heads have been turned back to the west. Both cows and bulls are present and, with the exception of one adult (4 years or more), all were sub-adults (c. 2–2.5 years old) and therefore the makings of a first-rate meal. Although disturbed to greater or lesser degrees by the plunderers, it is clear that the animals were whole (un-butchered) when deposited in the grave and represent a significant sacrifice of valuable assets.

Aside from a large quantity of prime beef, the tomb contained little else. Notable was part of a White cross-lined bowl decorated with thick parallel lines originally in white, but now faded to ghost impressions. More intriguing are the three bow-tie shaped flints. Two fragmentary examples were found mixed in the tomb fill, while a complete one emerged from a depression in the hard gravels beside the grave, much like the flint donkey, suggesting that they are all ritual offerings rather than grave goods. Together with the bow-tie found near Tomb 20 in 2009 and another found by Tomb 48 this year, we now have five of these curious objects, all apparently made by the same craftsmen (see next article), but for reasons yet unknown.

Since it straddles the border between the Tomb 16 complex and that of Tomb 23 (or whatever lies in the un-explored area to the south), exactly whose herd of cattle is buried in Tomb 49 remains to be determined. While the bow-ties suggest that Tomb 49 belongs to the already expansive compound of Tomb 16, only further excavations can answer this question. Whoever the owner, his ability to bury such a large herd of high quality animals is an eloquent statement on the extent of his power and on the wealth of Hierakonpolis overall. This tomb was no joke. It was meant to impress and indeed it does! 🐄



Photo: X. Droux

Tackling Tomb 49.



Photo: X. Droux

The last laugh? A cattle skull in Tomb 49.