

The Columned Hall at HK6 and Other Wonders

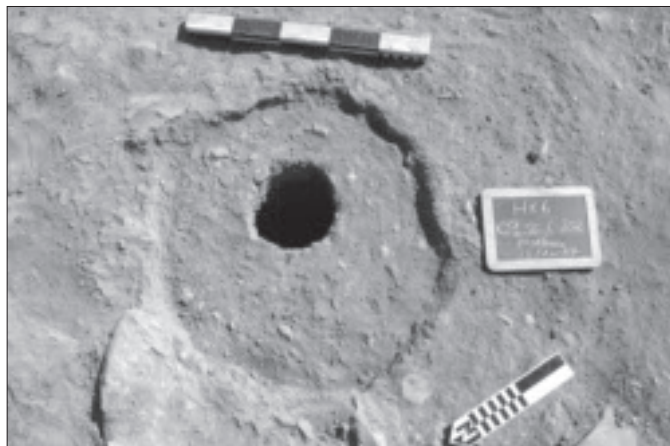
— by Xavier Droux and Renée Friedman

January signalled the return to the elite cemetery at HK6 and another chance to explore more of the precinct surrounding the royal Tomb 23. With last year's discovery of Structure D9 and the enigmatic painted wall B7, we realized we were investigating a funerary complex far larger and more elaborate than ever encountered in the Predynastic period. But in order to get a better idea of how the complex and this wall were related, we had to excavate the intervening area between them.

We began our work roughly mid-way between Structure D9 and the mysterious wall. Compared to other areas of the cemetery, the ground looked flat and barren—how looks are deceiving! The extent of the architecture and the quality of the material were remarkable. In fact, from the first trowel scrape to the last, we were captivated every single day of the three weeks of excavation!

Over the course of previous seasons, we had found enough postholes to know exactly how to recognise them at first glance. So when three dark spots of loose soil appeared soon after the start, we knew immediately that we were inside a new structure, though we had no idea it would be so large! Like Structure D9, this new building, dubbed Structure 07, had no substructure or tomb within it. Oriented parallel to the eight-columned Structure D9, the main difference between the two buildings is their size—Structure 07 is three times larger! About 15m long by 10.5m wide, its 24 columns were arranged in four rows of six (see cover).

On all four sides a closely spaced series of posts once covered with reeds and plaster formed its exterior walls. The trench holding the wall posts was filled with white plaster mixed with ash, perhaps as an insecticide. Against the



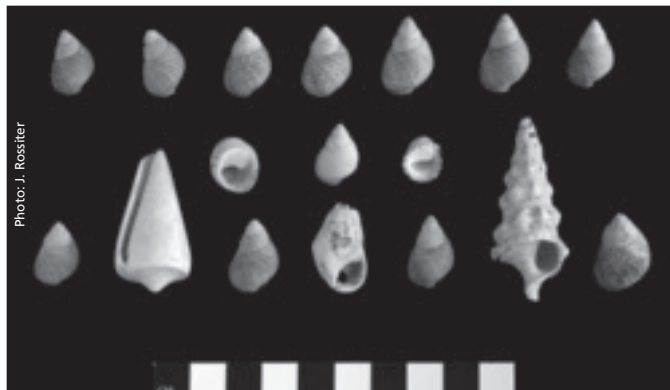
A perfectly preserved post mould.

reddish gravels of the natural soil, the white packing made it fairly easy to find the door in the west wall, which was accessed from the corridor running beside Structure D9. Framed within these walls, the postholes for the columns, often more than 1m deep and c. 60cm in diameter, were regularly spaced at roughly 2m intervals. We soon got to the point where we could predict where we would find the next one, but we could never guess what it would contain. In some, the wooden post, 20–30cm in diameter, was fairly well preserved; in others there was only the post mould, an empty cavity where the post had been, maintained perfectly within the dense soil packing the pit.

More surprisingly, many of the postholes also contained objects. It isn't easy to tell whether these artefacts were originally deposited within the postholes, or if they found their way in later; however, some cases are very suggestive. For example, the well-preserved wooden post in posthole A suggests that the 51 shells, all from the Red Sea, found in the upper layers around it may be in their original position. Seashells in lesser quantities were found in several other postholes, and all



HK6 in 2007.



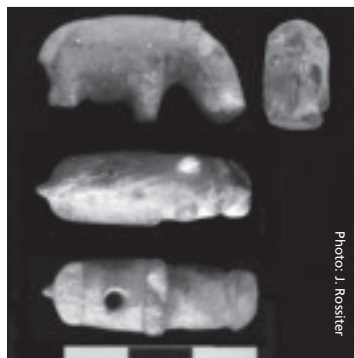
Posthole fillers: shells from the Red Sea.

together more than 300 shells of 12 different types were collected, as well as two crab claws, which had us guessing until archaeo-zoologist Wim Van Neer came to the rescue.

Possibly also still *in situ* was the cattle horn at the bottom of posthole X and a large bundle of coarse-woven cloth containing malachite found at the base of posthole AA. These objects seem to have been placed there intentionally as foundation deposits. Other postholes (D, X, BB, CC) contained fine textile in their upper layers and evidence for the controlled burning of organic materials, possibly aromatic herbs.

The postholes are puzzling, but the corners are clear, especially along the east. This is where the action was. Although disturbed in modern times, exploration of the northeast corner produced masses of ostrich eggshell fragments, some with incised designs. Found in quantities too great to mend, we asked our “eggspert” Art Muir to calculate the surface area of a standard ostrich egg and determine just how much area our fragments covered (not as easy as it sounds, see page 10). His analysis indicates that a least five complete eggs were originally present here and the fragmentary blow holes indicate that whole eggs were involved.

In the southeast corner there were more artefacts of different types, including one of the most adorable objects so far recovered—a tiny hippopotamus, just 3.3cm long. Despite its minimal size, it is quite well carved, but the front view shows that the artist, working from the sides, didn’t quite manage to meet up evenly at the face. This figurine was carved out of steatite (soapstone), a stone that was also used for making what seems to be a family of lions, at least to judge from the seven adult and two baby-sized legs. Frustratingly, we have yet to find the bodies to which they might attach. Whether this family, together with a profusion of small stone balls, derive from an ancient board game called *Mehen* remains unclear (pending the discovery of the circular board), but the dozens of little balls, some natural, others carved from exotic stones, found in clusters throughout this corner are traditionally considered gaming pieces.



The steatite hippo.



Finding our marbles?

Accompanying this collection of objects was a pair of curved ivory artefacts, which we call wands, but they could be clappers,



The ivory wands, almost ready to be lifted.

throw sticks, decorative tusks, etc. Uncovered in a frightening state of preservation, Richard Jaeschke was able to work his conservation magic and restore one to a semblance of its extraordinary beauty, reattaching two from a remarkable procession of at least four tiny hippos along the outer curve, all intricately carved from the same piece of hippo tusk (see color plates). In addition to this stunning piece, other ivories from the complex include at least five examples of the strange things we call “spoons”—our latest mystery object.

Although the hippos are charming, the real star of the corner is the fabulous malachite falcon. Found cracked into several pieces along the soft veins of the stone, it was only after patient restoration by Lamia el-Hadidy that we realized we had yet another first for Hierakonpolis—Egypt’s oldest falcon figurine, the greater significance of which is discussed below.

Measuring only 6.2cm in length, our falcon is tiny, but faint glimmerings of the ritual gigantism that led to the oversized palettes, mace heads and flint blades of the Early Dynastic period may already be seen among the distinctive hollow base flint arrowheads, which were found in large numbers in the south and central part of the structure. The large size, some nearly 10cm in length, suggests that they are oversized votive offerings, rather than objects of actual use. Their manufacture, with their long elegant wings, shows great skill and it is likely that the same craftsman was also responsible for another star find—a new flint ibex, which appeared like clock-work on the last day of the excavations. We wondered whether the work would end with a whimper or a bang, and bang it was when this twin to the piece found in 2000 near Tomb 23 (now on display in the Cairo Museum) appeared at the bottom of a modern pit.



Large hollow base arrowhead.



A missing member?

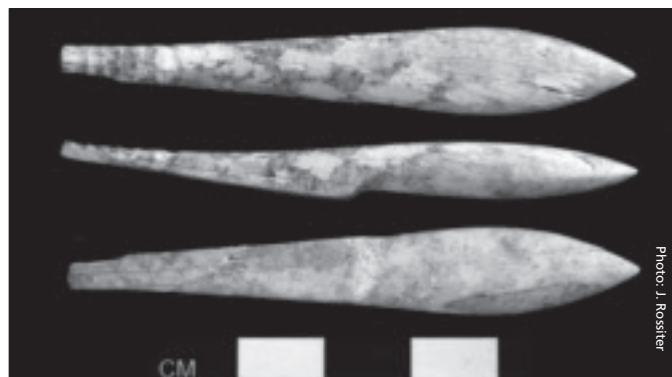
While animal imagery clearly played a major role in this structure, there is one object that may belong to the human realm. Like the nose and ears on statues, it is a part that is often missing. Made of calcite and measuring nearly 17cm long (6.5 inches), it may well be a feature of the almost life-sized statue from Tomb 23, but found within a disturbed context, its find spot is of no help in its identification.

Entered from the west, Structure 07 is clearly connected with the wider complex of tombs and buildings, all of which appear to be bounded on the east by Wall B7. Although we were not lucky enough to discover new fragments of painted plaster, we were able to trace the wall for a further 7m and there is still no end to it in sight.

The elaborate complex of interrelated wooden structures around Tomb 23 is now at least 50m E-W and 40m N-S and its elite, if not royal, status is obvious. Without parallel, further excavations are necessary to determine whether it is a "palace for eternity" modeled on the court of the living ruler, or a special precinct for conducting mortuary rituals and promoting the ancestor cult for all of the cemetery's elite inhabitants. Whoever or how many are being honored here, the size and complexity of the architecture and the fine and varied objects still surviving within it are writing a new chapter in the history of Egyptian prehistory. Next installment: February 2008! 

More Mysteries

Having solved the conundrum of the "near ears" (see below), we can now grapple with the mysterious "spoons", so-called only because of their resemblance to fast food coffee stirrers. Measuring 6.5cm in length, and lacking a depression at the well-polished wider end, they are certainly not spoons. The series of ribs carved into the curved upper surface at the narrower end suggests they were meant to be stuck into or tied to something. While one might propose an arrowhead (several of similar general shape are known from the Abydos Royal Tombs and Saqqara), the offset (rather than inset) of the flat area on the underside, once hafted to a shaft, would seemingly make for an asymmetrical assembly with questionable aerodynamics and only limited piercing ability. So what are they? We are stumped. Have any ideas? Write us: friendsofnekhen@yahoo.com. 

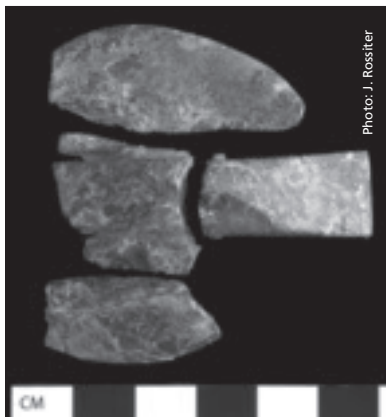


The mysterious "spoons".

The Falcon Has Landed: Falcons in "The City of the Falcon"

— by Stan Hendrickx and Renée Friedman

Found near the southeast corner of the Pillared Hall (Structure 07) at HK6, the fragments of a malachite-veined basalt figurine were initially a puzzle. After reconstruction, they proved to be a nearly complete statuette of a falcon, measuring 6.2cm from tip to tail. Beautifully worked, the wings are masterfully carved out of the same piece of hard stone and are linked to the body at only a single point of attachment. A remarkable artefact in its own right, it also allows us to identify three previously enigmatic objects from HK6 (the "near ears" of *Nekhen News* 17:7), one of red breccia found near Tomb 19 (Naqada IC-IIA) and a pair in white calcite from the northeast side of the Tomb 23 complex (Naqada IIAB), as the wings of other falcon figurines originally nearly twice as large (c. 10cm). Despite the difference in size, all three falcons must have been quite similar, especially considering the labor-intensive manner in which the wings were carved.



Falcon in fragments.

From their contexts within the elite cemetery, the HK6 falcons can be dated to the early Naqada II period and are therefore considerably earlier than any other known depiction of this bird of prey. With a head and body profile that will remain essentially unchanged through time, the HK6 falcon is the prototype for all later representations. Although the wings were no longer carved away from the body, their shape remained nearly identical.

Prior to this discovery, the earliest falcons appeared on two Decorated jars in the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum respectively, both unfortunately without provenance. Nevertheless, they can be dated to the Naqada IIC-IID1 period based on the boats painted on them. On these jars, the falcons occur as handles, essentially clay figurines applied to the shoulder of the vessels. Plastic elements are very rare on Decorated vessels, but when they do occur, they always involve representations that are not