

# When is a Tomb Not a Tomb?

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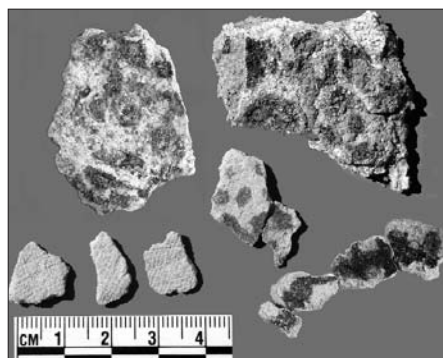
The first day of work in the elite cemetery at HK6 began with a good omen. While re-establishing (and re-numbering) the site grid, several fragments from at least two new ceramic masks were observed lying on the surface at the eastern edge of the wadi terrace (square B7). The upper left portion of one mask could be reassembled: it features an arching eyebrow above a cut-out eye, a well-modeled ear with a deep circular impression for the ear hole, and a series of piercings along the scalp line, presumably for the insertion of hair. Continuing a theme developed last season, the ear of another mask and two more fragmentary, but possibly unrelated, ears were also recovered. Was it going to be another good y(ear)?



New masks and more ears!

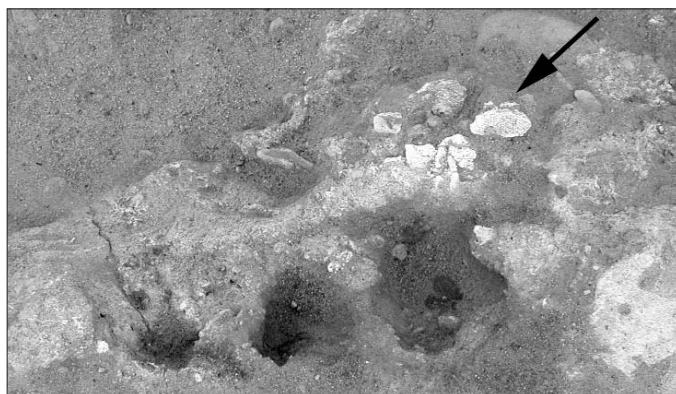
Presuming that the masks had been thrown out from a tomb located nearby, we plotted their positions and began excavating in earnest. The surface in this area looked relatively intact, so the chances of uncovering a largely undisturbed tomb seemed high. Of course — at Hierakonpolis — things are never quite what they seem!

As well as recovering a few more mask fragments, our work revealed a line of closely spaced posts, c. 6–12 cm in



Fragments of painted plaster.

diameter, running north–south. Around some of the posts was a thick packing of coarse white plaster, in places still covered with an exterior coat of finer quality, some of which was painted! Although



The plastered wall. Arrow points to painted plaster.

small and poorly preserved, the designs include rows of dots, chevrons, alternating squares, and a motif reminiscent of the flowering stem of the so-called “Naqada plant”. Comparisons with the famous Painted Tomb seemed inevitable, and we struggled to contain our excitement at the prospect of finding a new tomb to rival Tomb 23, located only 25m to the west.

Many days of digging in the hard desert soil on the west side of the wall, however, revealed nothing but natural deposits, pebbles and large rocks. High winds prevented us from exploring our fragile painted wall further at this time, and with our hopes of finding a tomb dashed, we abandoned the area and moved to squares D9–D10 on the east side of Tomb 23. Perhaps here, adjacent to the “real thing”, we would have more luck, or failing that, at least find more fragments of the limestone statue (see *Nekhen News* 17: 5–7). After several more days of digging through sterile soil, we had a couple of ashy pits and only four more pieces of the statue to show for our efforts; sadly it seems that the core of the statue, to which the now over 560 fragments once fitted, must have been hauled away long ago.

Our enthusiasm was seriously beginning to waver, when suddenly we came across a large area of fire-discolored earth, 4m from, but parallel with the enclosure wall of Tomb 23. Further excavation revealed a line of closely-spaced posts, and eventually a rectangular structure about 9.5m long N–S and 5.75m wide. In total, more than 150 posts were observed, those on the west and east having been severely burned at some point in antiquity.

Surely this time we had found the enclosure wall for a tomb; yet, further excavation revealed a building whose focus was entirely above ground. There was no tomb or substructure within it! Instead, the walls surrounded two rows of rather shallow post-holes (c. 50cm in diameter) set approximately 2m apart running down the centre of the structure. In one of the eight pits, a wooden column (c. 20cm in diameter) was partly preserved.



Overview of Structure D9.

Although digging and plotting posts and holes can get a little tedious (especially for Hamdy, who we renamed Postman Pat), on occasion Structure D9 did give up some of its secrets. Near the northeast corner, a shallow pit (Deposit D — see map) contained two rare hippopotamus tusk figurines, both with a perforated loop at the tip. As usual, these figures occur in pairs, one of them solid, the other hollow for part of its length, the significance of which remains speculative. The same deposit also contained a worked ivory plaque, a selection of small round hematite pebbles, and several shells from the Red Sea coast including cowrie, *Cerithidae*/horn shell and cone shell. Another deposit (C), found near the southeast corner, contained 36 *Nerita* shells undisturbed in two clusters. Notably, this apparently votive offering was found beneath the lenses of ash produced when the wall burned, demonstrating that this deposit was made before the destruction of the building.

Structure D9 could be distinguished from the other areas under excavation not only by its lack of substructure and its concentrations of sea shells and ivories, but also by the large

amount of ostrich eggshell found within it, two fragments of which bear incised decoration. Also conspicuous by their absence were the unpolished red ritual bottles and flint arrowheads of the other compounds. In fact, a long rectangular flint blade, c. 12 x 3.2 cm, was the only tool found in association with the structure. This differential distribution of artifacts suggests that each of the buildings surrounding Tomb 23 served a separate purpose, but whether each had a different focus remains to be determined.

Structure D9 remains a mystery. Is it part of a much larger funerary complex associated with Tomb 23? Could it be an offering chapel, or a covered storage area for commodities used during the burial rites? This type of architecture is unparalleled for the predynastic period, and is another first for Hierakonpolis.

While on the topic of firsts, towards the end of the season, excavations along the line of posts in squares B7–B8 were resumed, and the wall was traced for a total of 21m north–south; it continues under the sand for an unknown distance in both directions. It is tempting to suggest that this fence is the enclosure wall of the entire cemetery, and that the designs painted on it served as the highly visible prototype for the images which appear later in the Painted Tomb. This may also be the way the recurrent motifs on pottery and other small objects became known in the Naqada II period. But these conjectures can only be proven by further excavation, which we are now anxious to undertake in January 2007.

Locality HK6 undoubtedly has many more secrets to disclose — secrets that promise to challenge our understanding of elite burial practices in predynastic Egypt. So, when is a tomb not a tomb? Answer: when it's something potentially far more exciting! □



## Coming Up in 2006/07

Follow along as we try our hand at reproducing authentic Nekhen Beer (for scientific purposes only, of course!)

Updates at:  
[www.archaeology.org](http://www.archaeology.org)  
(technology willing).



Uncovering the sea shell deposit at Structure D9.



Beer vat being prepared.