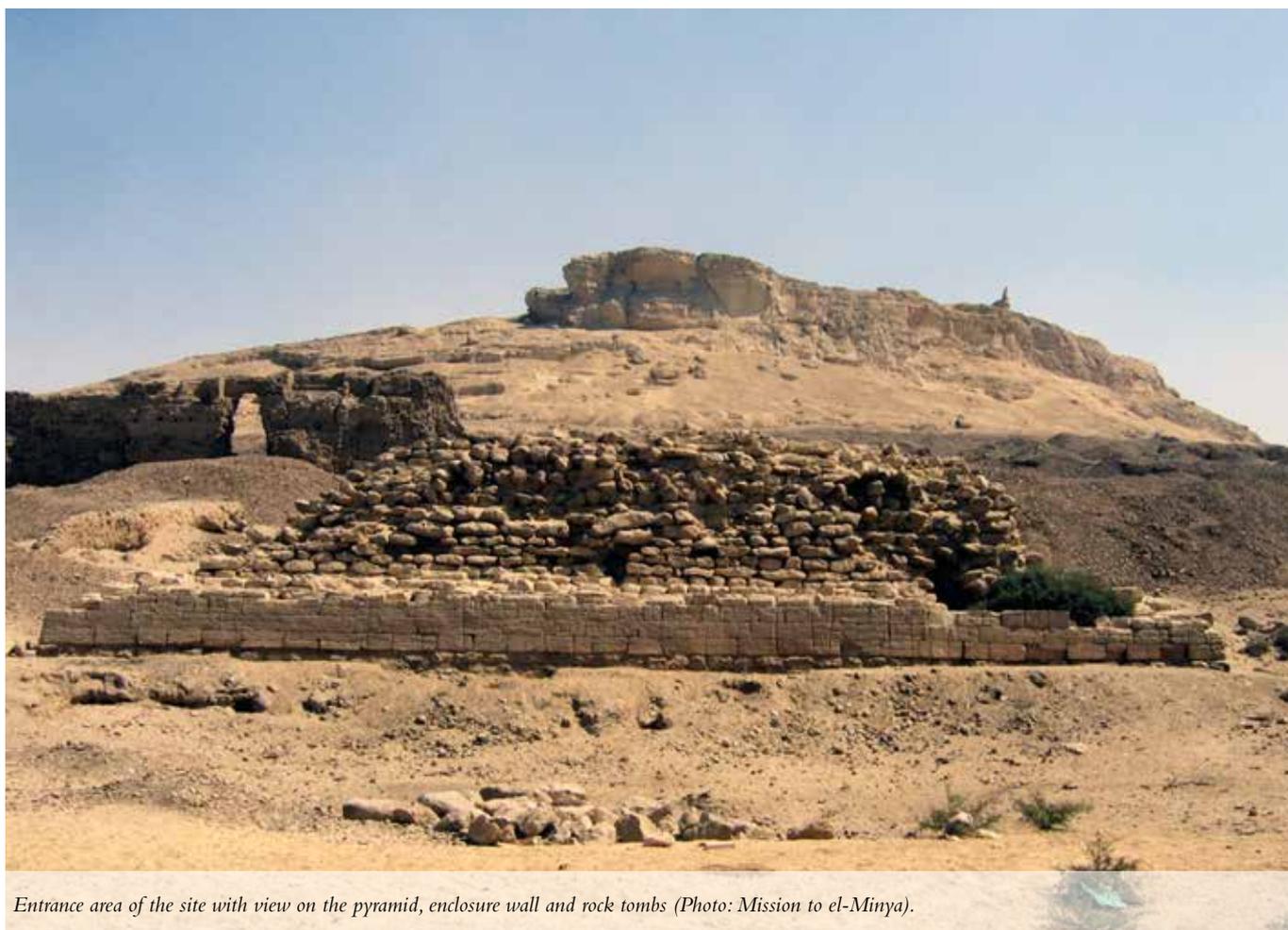


The pyramid, town and cemeteries of Zawyet Sultan

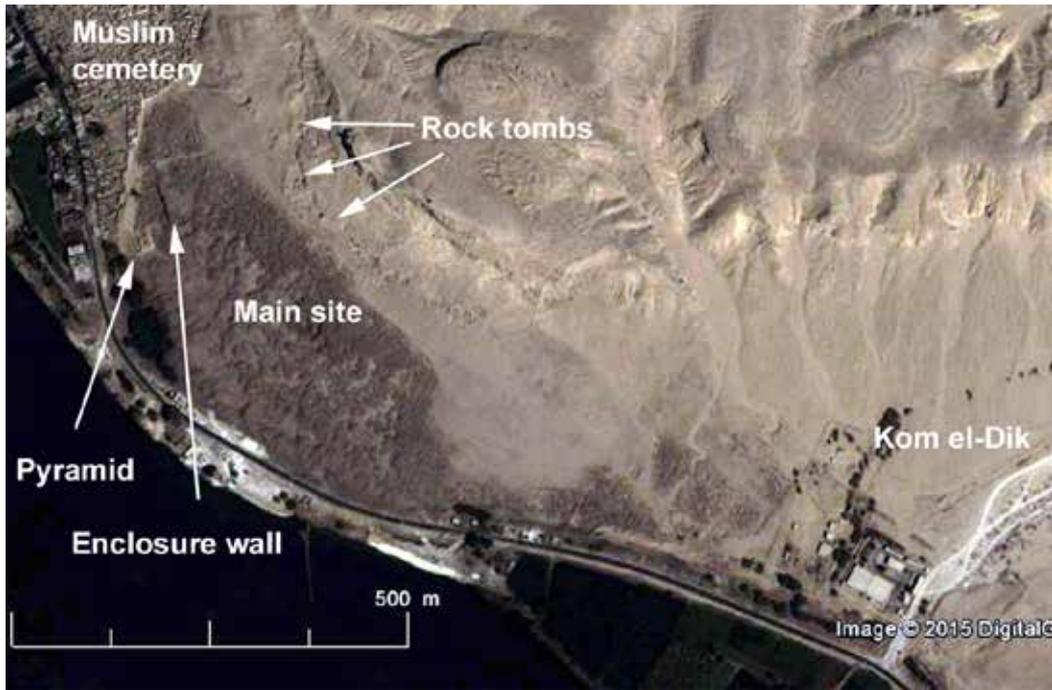
The archaeological remains of Hebenu, modern Zawyet Sultan, opposite el-Minya, shed light on the life of a provincial town from prehistory up to the early Islamic Period. **Richard Bussmann**, **Gianluca Miniaci**, **Aly el-Bakry** and **Elena Tiribilli** present the preliminary results of their 2015 survey at the site.

The remains of Hebenu offer an excellent opportunity to explore an ancient Egyptian settlement together with the cemeteries of its inhabitants. The archaeological site lies adjacent to the modern village of Zawyet Sultan, better known in Egyptology as Zawyet el-Maiyitin, Zawyet al-Amwat or Kom el-Ahmar. Hebenu was the capital of the 16th Upper Egyptian nome in pharaonic times and is most famous for its small pyramid and a series of decorated rock tombs of the Old and New Kingdoms. Previous fieldwork at the site, by Richard

Lepsius, Alexandre Varille, Raymond Weill and a team led by Barry Kemp, has brought to light a wealth of objects from the Predynastic Period, the Old and New Kingdoms and the Late Period through the early Islamic Period. However, it is difficult to understand how monuments and objects relate to the settlement remains and the landscape of Hebenu. The aim of the current archaeological mission therefore is to establish a local context for the pyramid and to explore life at Hebenu/Zawyet Sultan over the past 5,000 years.



Entrance area of the site with view on the pyramid, enclosure wall and rock tombs (Photo: Mission to el-Minya).



Map of the site with major archaeological features (Image: Google earth).

The archaeological site occupies the desert slope, beginning at the modern village and the large Muslim cemetery in the north, reaching an open area one kilometre further south, called Kom el-Dik, where archaeological remains start mixing up with modern construction debris. Today's site sits hard at the bank of the river, and substantial parts of the ancient settlement, which might extend below the village and Muslim cemetery, have probably been washed away. Previous excavations mainly concentrated on the northern part of the site. Well-known features in this area include the pyramid and the rock tombs as well as a large chunk of an enclosure wall, inscribed blocks of the New Kingdom

and a staircase, which leads to the Ramesside rock tomb of Nefersekeru.

The pyramid (see the photograph on the opposite page) dominates the entrance area to the site. It is one of the seven known small pyramids of Upper Egypt dated to the late Third Dynasty. All are built in the accretion layer technique and have almost identical measurements. Unlike the other pyramids, however, the pyramid of Hebenu has an outer casing of smooth bright limestone blocks. Werner Kaiser and Günter Dreyer hypothesized that this casing might be a later addition, and there is some evidence supporting their hypothesis: marks on the outer surface of the blocks seem to stem from



Right: mud brick structures in front of the pyramid (Photo: Mission to el-Minya).



Left: chambers on top of the enclosure wall.

Opposite page: rectangular and anthropoid shafts in the tomb of Khunes.

Below: Burial shafts of subaltern elites. Bottom: burial chamber near staircase.

(All photos: Mission to el-Minya)

claw chisels, which were not typically used in the Old Kingdom.

Some mud-brick structures are visible on the surface to the west of the pyramid. They might belong to an ancillary building of the pyramid, similar to the structures found at the pyramids of Elephantine and Edfu.

Pottery collected during the survey from the layers abutting against the foundations of the outer casing of the pyramid covers almost the entire history of Ancient Egypt, ranging from the late Old Kingdom to the Roman Period. However, the stratigraphy is much disturbed in this area. Weill discovered near the pyramid an area which he called 'predynastic cemetery M'. Unfortunately, there are no definite traces of the cemetery visible on the surface today.

The main area of the site was originally occupied by what probably were domestic structures. The mud bricks were later dug up, and the area is now covered by massive heaps of pottery, mostly domestic debris. Some rectangular chambers, perhaps cellars, located towards the upper end of the desert slope, demarcate the original extent of occupation. Judging from the surface pottery, the last phase of activity in this area can be dated to the Roman Period. A series of similar chambers were built on top of the enclosure wall (see photo above), indicating perhaps that the Roman town originally extended beyond the wall.

Previous excavators noted a series of shaft tombs and mastabas located at the main site (see the pictures on the right). The 2015 survey revealed that these are part of an extensive cemetery lying below the Roman settlement. Over one hundred shafts were recorded behind the enclosure wall at the lower end of the desert slope up to the rock tombs. Some of them cluster together and





could well belong to a single tomb. Near the staircase, a stone-lined burial chamber was found exposed, whose shaft had been quarried away. The architectural structure of the funerary chamber reveals a layout that we would expect at the bottom of other shafts as well. In all likelihood, the main site originally was the cemetery of the subaltern elites of Hebenu in the late Old Kingdom. These mid-ranking officials were buried on the desert slope below the rock tombs of their patrons, a typical pattern of cemetery organisation in Middle Egypt, also seen, for example, at Beni Hassan.

The inscriptions and architecture of the rock tombs were originally published by Lepsius, who identified 16 decorated structures. One of the best-preserved examples was the tomb of Khunes, Lepsius' tomb no. 2. Khunes was a late Old Kingdom official, who probably lived during the reign of Teti (c.2320–2300 BC). His tomb was largely intact, when Lepsius visited Zawyet Sultan.

Today, a large part of the structure is missing and the area is covered by debris and stone blocks that have collapsed into the tomb. The tomb, with three main chambers and three rectangular shafts, was later re-used for intrusive burials: 20 roughly anthropoid cavities were cut into the floor of the chambers in order to accommodate corpses or coffins. A comparison of the maps and drawings in Lepsius' *Denkmäler* with the preserved walls shows that he did not record all architectural features, some of which are now covered by debris. He also missed some parts of the wall decoration and several inscriptions. More inscriptions may be found on the fragments and blocks in front of the entrance area of the tomb. This material as well as the history of the tomb's destruction over the past 150 years require fuller investigation in the future.

Parallel to the excavation, the team of the mission has begun the documentation of objects from Hebenu

excavated by Weill and now housed in the Louvre Museum. Weill assembled his own collection from purchased objects and those found during his excavations (including material from Zawyet Sultan), shared with the Egyptian government – common practice at the time. In 1950, he bequeathed the largest part of this collection to the Musée du Louvre, with usufruct in favour of his wife. After Mme Weill's death in 1992, the collection finally became property of the Museum, which now houses – among the rest of the collection – more than 350 objects from Zawyet Sultan. The analysis of these objects will contribute to the integration of Weill's excavation reports with current fieldwork at the site.

From the 2015 survey, it appears possible, with all due caution, to say that the Old Kingdom settlement concentrated on the area around the pyramid. Rock tombs for the highest officials at the site were built in the late Old Kingdom together with a cemetery for the subaltern elites below. No trace of Middle Kingdom activity has been recorded at the site. In the New Kingdom, tombs and temples were built at Hebenu, whereas the settlement proper was located outside the confines of the modern archaeological site. During the Roman Period, the site was overbuilt with houses, and the cemeteries moved further south. By this time, the pyramid was probably long forgotten and buried under the settlement.

□ The mission is directed by Richard Bussmann, Gianluca Miniaci and Aly el-Bakry. Richard Bussmann is Senior Lecturer at University College London. Gianluca Miniaci is Marie Curie Research Fellow at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, and Honorary Research Associate of the UCL Institute of Archaeology. Aly el-Bakry is chief inspector of North Minya. Elena Tiribilli is an independent researcher and member of the missions to el-Minya and Tell Mutubis.