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Tell Abqa'in: a Fortified Settlement in the Western Delta Preliminary Report of the 1997 Season

By SUSANNA THOMAS

(Plate 43)

The site of Tell Abqa'in, 75 km south-east of Alexandria and 5 km south-east of the modern town of Hosh Isa in the Bahriya Governorate, has long been regarded as one of a chain of forts constructed during the reign of Ramesses II on the edge of the Western Delta and out to the west along the coast¹. Possible locations for forts in this chain have been suggested, on the basis of finds of Ramesside masonry, at el-Alamein and Gharbaniyat on the Mediterranean coast², while the fortification of existing towns like Kom el-Hisn³ (20 miles South-East of Abqa'in) on the edge of the Western Delta would indicate the continuation of a defensive line towards the capital at Memphis. However, any definite identification of fortifications of a Ramesside date at these sites remains elusive, apart from the substantial fortress located 300 km west of Alexandria at Zawiyet Umm el-Rakham⁴ and the Western Delta site of Tell Abqa'in. As part of a major project to examine Ramesside military occupation in Marmarica and the Western Delta, a team from the University of Liverpool, directed by SUSANNA THOMAS, has begun a fieldwork project at Tell Abqa'in⁵.

Tell Abqa'in was identified as a Ramesside site as early as 1903 by DARESSY who reported⁶ two neighbouring mounds, each having a diameter of approximately 150 m and a height no greater than 6 m. On one of these mounds was a group of limestone blocks, inscribed with large hieroglyphic characters, which he assumed were part of a gate/doorway. This *tell* was later visited by HABACHI⁷ in 1941, by which time the blocks seen by DARESSY had lost their inscribed faces, these having been sawn off and removed to the Graeco-Roman Museum at Alexandria⁸. However, close to these blocks, HABACHI located a further set, again inscribed with large hieroglyphs, and was able to trace part of the mud-brick wall which was broken by this gateway. It should be noted that there are various problems with

¹ K.A. KITCHEN, *Pharaoh Triumphant*, Warminster 1982, p. 261.

² L. HABACHI, in: *BIFAO* 80, 1980, pp. 13–30.

³ W. COULSON, in: E.C.M. VAN DEN BRINK, *The Archaeology of the Nile Delta*, Amsterdam 1988, pp. 259–263.

⁴ S. SNAPE, in: C.J. EYRE (ed.), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 1081–1085.

⁵ For greatly facilitating the work of the mission in 1997, the author would like to thank STEVEN SNAPE, GABALLA A. GABALLA, ABD EL-SALAAM ABU BAKR and MAGDI SAYED in Cairo, RABIA AMIN ABU EL-KASIM in Alexandria and ASHRAF ABD EL-RAHMAN who was the accompanying archaeologist. The mission is also grateful for the financial support of the Wainwright Fund, the Liverpool University Research Development Fund, and the Flinders Petrie Scholarship in Egyptian Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL.

⁶ M.G. DARESSY, in: *ASAE* 5, 1904, pp. 129–130.

⁷ L. HABACHI, in: *ASAE* 52, 1954, pp. 482–484.

⁸ Accession number JE 21009.

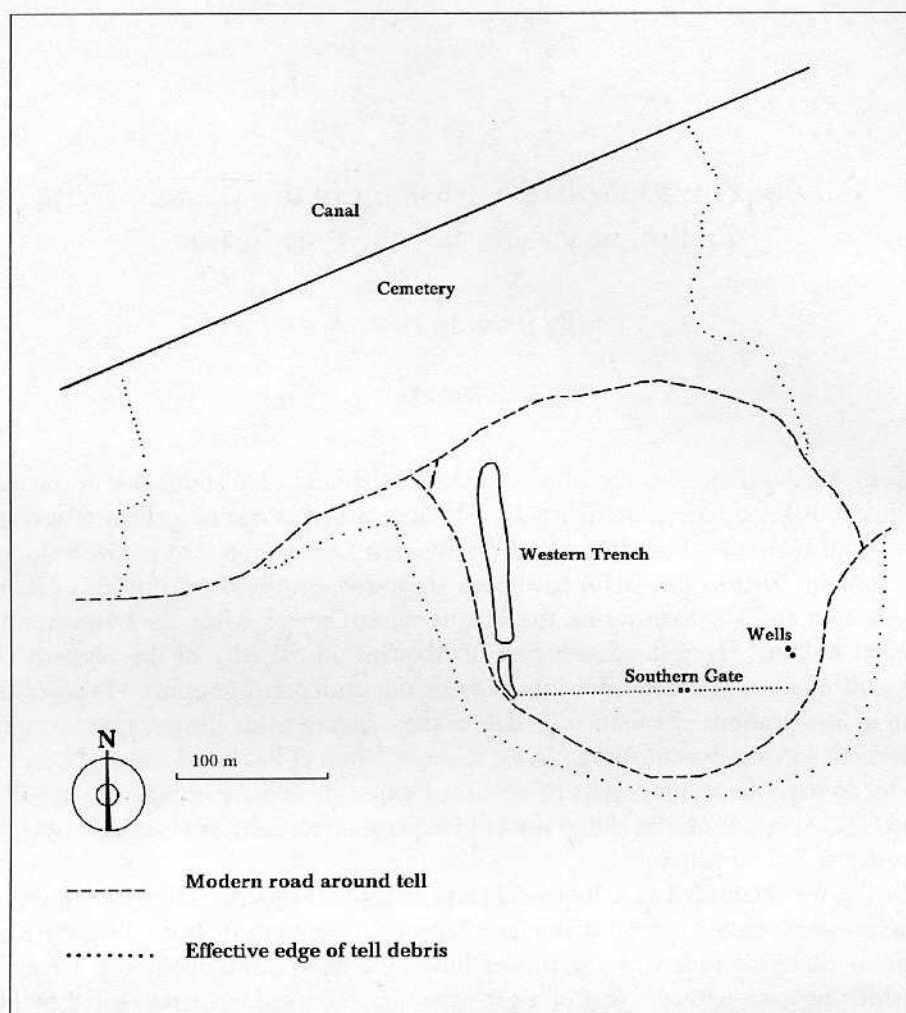


Fig. 1: Plan of Tell Abqa'in

HABACHI's description of the site; the inversion of the cardinal points in his text leads to confusion over the location of the wells, which lie to the east, not the west⁹ of the gate, and the sketch-plan he provides of the site¹⁰ is misleading in that his north arrow is actually pointing south-west. The south-west corner of the mud-brick wall indicated on his plan is well short of the extent of this wall traced by the Liverpool team in 1997, but it is possible that he noticed a structure built inside the fortress abutting the southern wall.

Of the two mounds still visible at Tell Abqa'in, the north-western is now much smaller in size than its south-eastern neighbour and less immediately interesting. It is largely covered by a modern cemetery and, though sherd material (mostly Late Roman) lies on the surface, no more substantial remains are visible. The south-eastern mound, however, is an impressive *tell*, with a pitted and undulating surface.

⁹ HABACHI, *op. cit.*, p. 484.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pl. XXIV, A.

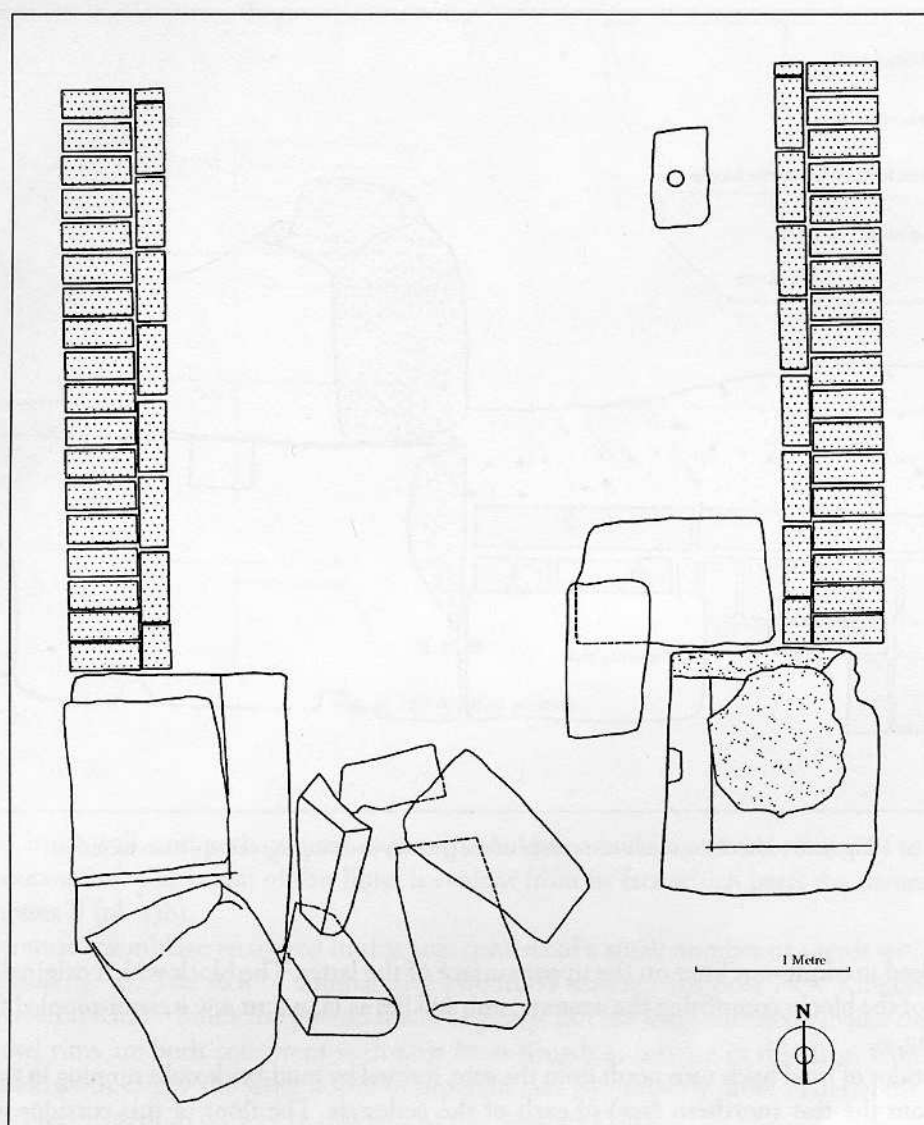


Fig. 2: Plan of the southern gate

Outcrops of mud-brick walling can be seen in the face of the *tell*, particularly where *sebbakh* digging has produced relatively steep faces where the partial stratigraphy of the site may be seen. This is especially true in an enormous cutting which effectively defines the western side of the *tell*.

In 1996 the Liverpool Mission conducted surface survey and mapping of the site of Tell Abqa'in. In 1997 work concentrated on the excavation of the gateway (fig. 2) which has, until now, been the most remarked-upon feature of the site. After a limited excavation around the visible surface masonry a number of observations could be made about the nature and construction of the gate. First, it was clear that the only stone elements which can be regarded as *in situ* were the two massive pedestals on which each of the jambs stood, the lower portion of the western jamb and one paving block. The lower portion of the eastern jamb is in a mangled state, having had at least one of its faces removed in modern times, but is essentially in place. The intended original positions of the jambs on the pedestals are indicated

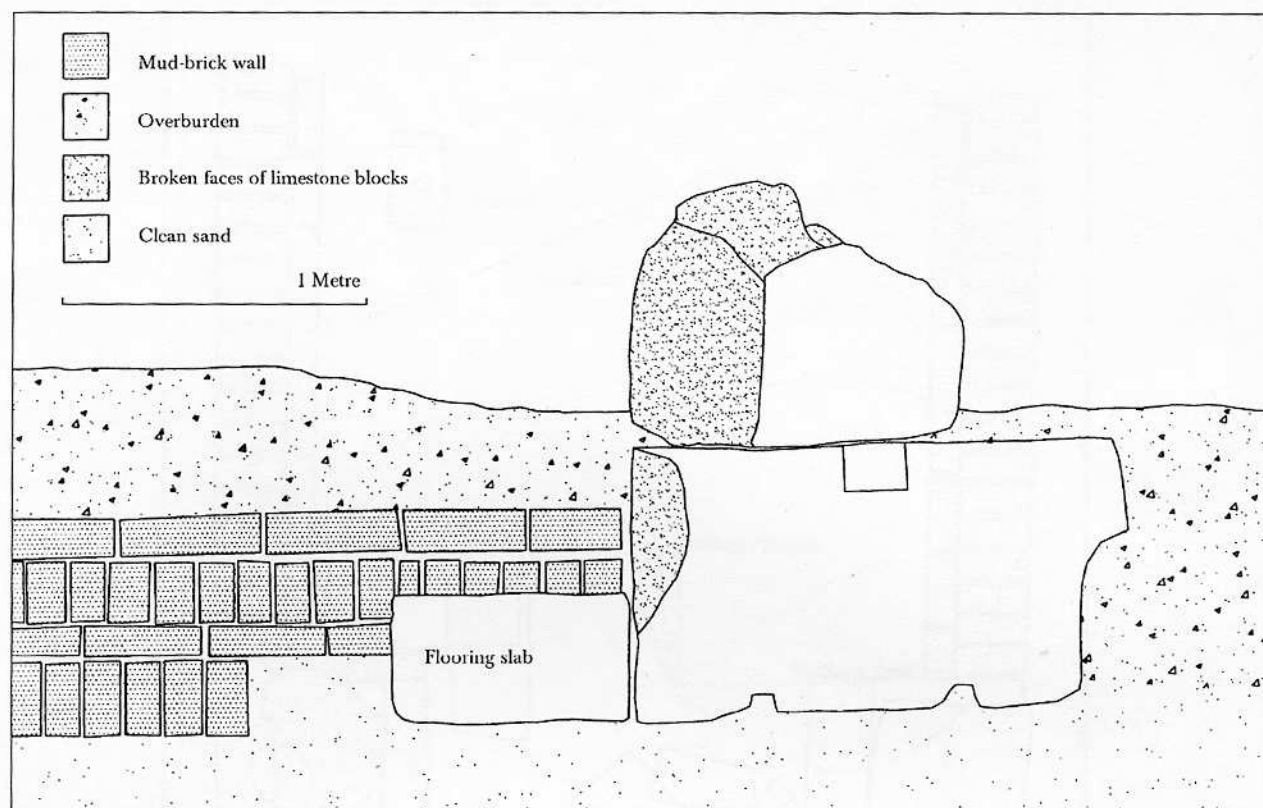


Fig. 3: Section of the south-east corner of the gateway showing the construction technique

by the incised marking-out lines on the upper surface of the latter. The block which originally sat upon the lowest of the blocks comprising the western jamb still lies as HABACHI saw it, semi-toppled from its original setting.

A corridor of mud brick runs north from the gate, formed by mud-brick walls running in that direction for 6 m from the rear (northern face) of each of the pedestals. The floor of this corridor was levelled using clean sand, on which were set what are assumed to be the flooring slabs of the corridor proper, only one of which now remains *in situ*, wedged up against the eastern pedestal. The relationship between the pedestal, mud-brick wall and flooring slab is illustrated in fig. 3.

If we assume that the whole of this corridor was paved with limestone slabs – not unreasonable if this was indeed the major southern entrance to a substantial walled town – then one must also explain the disappearance of these slabs. HABACHI's suggestion that elements of the jambs had been taken away in antiquity for reuse or to be burnt for lime¹¹ seems likely. The tumble of assorted limestone blocks lying between the two pedestals, and particularly within what seems to be a shallow pit immediately to the east of the western pedestal, may well be the remnants of this deliberate destruction.

Reuse of Ramesside material is apparent at the northern end of the eastern mud-brick wall, with the placement of a limestone lintel, from an impressive if narrow doorway, face down on the edge of a

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 484.

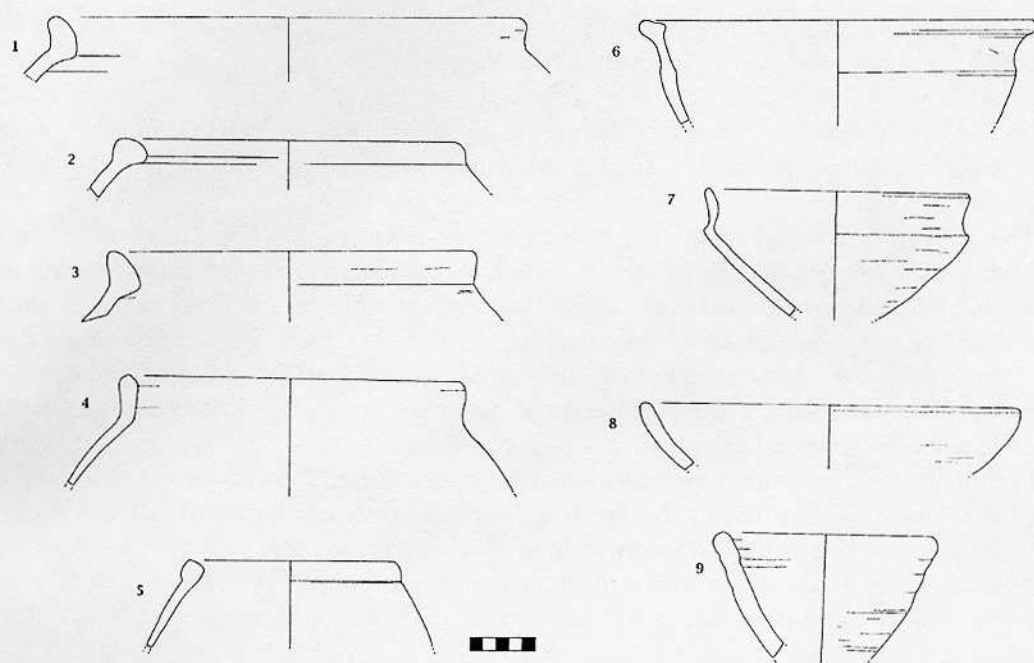


Fig. 4: Tell Abqa'in pottery

smaller mud-brick wall, and perhaps used as the threshold to a building which continues to the north and awaits excavation. The origin of this lintel is evident from its face which bears the names and titulary of Ramesses II (pl. 43b).

The ceramic assemblage recovered in this area consists of a small number of sherds with a limited range of forms (fig. 4). The lack of comparative published material (i.e. post New Kingdom pottery from the Western Delta)¹² limits the potential of this group, but the large enclosed *zir*-like rims and the carinated bowl rims are both consistent with post New Kingdom activity in this area. Continued excavation should both clarify the sequence of occupation and also provide more material for a detailed study of post New Kingdom pottery in this part of the Western Delta.

The western side of the *tell* is defined by an enormous cutting which runs north to south. The southern end of this trench cuts into a substantial mud-brick wall, approximately 4.6 m wide, which runs east-west and seems to originate at its eastern end at the gate observed by DARESSY and HABACHI. However, the wall is substantially longer than the estimate shown in HABACHI's plan of the site. The western extent of this wall (and thus, presumably, the western extent of the site itself) has still to be determined, a task made more difficult by the presence of the modern roadway and encroachment of modern agriculture (see fig. 1). Assuming that the fortress/town of Abqa'in is rectangular in plan, and the present northern and eastern edges of the high part of the *tell* approximately represent the positions of the north and east walls, the total area of the site works out at over 50,000 square metres.

The thickness of the wall is also interesting. At 4.6 m thick it seems to belong to a category of fortress/town walls of the Ramesside Period which were built for defence against a perceived threat. A com-

¹² Reasonable parallels can be found in the three major phases identified by ASTON, *Egyptian Pottery*, while a later Persian/Saite date is also possible.

parison can be made with the North Sinai fort at Haruba where the walls are 4 m wide¹³, and the Libyan fortress at Zawiyet Umm el-Rakham where the external walls are 5 m thick and provided with deep corridor-like gateways. The thickness of the walls at Abqa'in and at Zawiyet Umm el-Rakham seems to be based not on their resistance to battering-type attacks of siege warfare¹⁴ but as a prerequisite for high walls, which may well have been 10 m tall with a commanding view of the desert to the west, and therefore not scaleable.

This site can be contrasted with the Nubian fortress-towns of the New Kingdom which, unlike their Middle Kingdom predecessors, do not seem to have concerned themselves primarily with defence probably because they were located in an imperial possession which was perceived to be well pacified¹⁵. Amara West¹⁶, a major example of a New Kingdom fortified town in Nubia founded during the reign of Seti I, had a perimeter 108 m square, but walls only 2.3 to 2.8 m thick. The so-called Town Gate was 1.88 m wide, paved with stone slabs, and had stone jambs 0.85 x 0.92 m wide inscribed with the names and titles of Ramesses II in vertical columns.

In summary, the first season of excavation at Abqa'in has produced archaeological material which argues for the likely foundation of the site as a significant fortress-town on the West Delta/Libyan marches in the New Kingdom, almost certainly in the reign of Ramesses II. It has produced evidence which indicates that by the Third Intermediate Period the stone elements of the southern gateway at least were considered surplus to requirements and more or less systematically stripped out, at least partially for architectural reuse.

Abstract

Tell Abqa'in, south-east of Alexandria, is almost certainly the site of one of a chain of forts on the margin of the Western Delta and out to the west along the coast, constructed during the reign of Ramesses II in response to the growing threat created by general political and military instability in the eastern Mediterranean towards the end of the Late Bronze Age.

Since 1996 a Liverpool University team has been working to establish any similarities between this and the coastal fortress site at Zawiyet Umm el-Rakham. Interesting comparisons can be made between the defensive foundations at both sites, with Abqa'in also containing the added complexity of later, Third Intermediate Period occupation.

¹³ E.D. OREN, in: A.F. RAINEY (ed.), *Egypt, Israel, Sinai*, Tel Aviv 1987, pp. 69–119.

¹⁴ One might argue that the 'Libyans' would not have the siege warfare technology to attempt such an attack, but a counter-argument might be the perceived threat from militarily more competent groups like the Sea-Peoples who were already present as a military component as Sherden mercenaries in the army of Ramesses II.

¹⁵ Certainly as far as Lower Nubia was concerned with an effective boundary at the Fourth Cataract. Note that the defences of the New Kingdom fortress town at Buhen were little more than the reuse of the Middle Kingdom fortifications with little alteration to the earlier structure, see W.B. EMERY ET AL., *The Fortress of Buhen: The Archaeological Report*, EES 12, London 1979, p. 13.

¹⁶ P. SPENCER, *Amara West I*, London 1997.



a) Looking north through the southern gateway



b) Lintel with Ramesses II cartouches