

Ain el-Gedida 2007 Excavations

The 2007 excavation season at the site of Ain el-Gedida (Dakhleh Oasis Project site no. 31/405-N3-1) was carried out from 20 January to 15 February 2007, under the direction of the local Coptic and Islamic Inspectorate and in collaboration with a team sponsored by Columbia University and Professor Roger Bagnall.

The DOP conducted a preliminary survey of the site in 1980, and the local Coptic and Islamic Inspectorate carried out three seasons of excavation between 1993 and 1995, under the direction of Ahmed Salem and Kamel Bayumi. The Southern part of Mound I (plate 1) was the main object of archaeological investigation. Excavation was resumed in 2006. The documentation of the rooms excavated in the 1990s was begun in that year; five rooms were also excavated in the Northern half of Mound I, including room B5 identified as a church.

The staff of the 2007 mission consisted of Prof. Roger Bagnall, project director in cooperation with Ahmed Salem; Nicola Aravecchia, archaeological field director; Kamel Ahmed Bayumi, cooperating archaeologist; Dorota Dziejczak and Roberta Casagrande-Kim, archaeologists; Delphine Dixneux, ceramicist; Angela Cervi, registrar; Marina Nuovo, assistant registrar; Simone Occhi and Fabrizio Pavia, topographers. The inspector was Sahar Habeb Farid of the local Coptic and Islamic Inspectorate.

Before the beginning of the excavation season two rooms (A6, identifiable as a large kitchen, and A7 to the North-East of A6), previously excavated by the SCA, were fully documented and photographed; the poor conditions of preservation of the walls and of the features located inside, such as two ovens in the North-West corner of A6, required the complete backfilling of these two rooms, together with the adjacent spaces to the West and the corridor to the North. The excavation of room A25, begun in the 1990s, was completed and the documentation of its features updated.

The excavation of the church (room B5), begun in 2006, was completed with the removal of an extensive collapse layer that covered most of the church above floor level (plates 2–3). The context of the area within the apse and to its West was largely disturbed, as pits were dug down to *gebel*. A North-South oriented wall was found below floor level, cutting the nave of the church in two halves. This seems to be the same wall that was identified last year in room A46, to the North of B5. Against the North wall of room B5 a three-stepped mud-brick podium was uncovered in a rather good state of preservation.

After the excavation of the church, the archaeological investigation was extended to include the spaces to the North of room A46. This large hall was connected, through a doorway by its North-West corner, to a rectangular vaulted room (B6), which was used, at least in its latest occupational phase, for the preparation of food (plate 4). Indeed, a hearth with several traces of ashes and charcoal was found against a low, rectangular platform along the North wall. Another raised platform was uncovered along the East wall, with imprints of jars still visible on its surface. Other imprints of vessel were located along the South wall of the room at floor level. A series of graffiti was found on the West and North walls, including two inscriptions and some drawings such as two boats and a bird.

A long East-West corridor (B7) was excavated along the North side of room A46 (plate 4). Its North and South walls are preserved to a considerable height and are in a fairly good state of conservation. B7 opened onto room B6 through a now badly damaged doorway and seems to have

functioned as the only entrance to the church complex. A thick layer of occupational debris was found above the scanty remains of the original floor.

After rooms B6 and B7 were completely excavated and documented, another set of spaces was investigated further North. A staircase (B8) was uncovered to the North of room B6 and is well preserved (plate 5). It led, through a doorway placed in the Eastern half of the North wall of room B6, to the roof of A46 and of other rooms adjacent to it (i.e., rooms B9–10 mentioned below). The upper part of the staircase, which is almost completely preserved, was supported by a narrow vaulted passageway opening from room B6 into B9 (plate 6). The state of preservation of this room is extremely poor. Built in the South wall of the room by its South-East corner, behind very thick layers of wall and vault collapse, was a mud-brick recessed feature that might have been used as a cupboard. Room B9 was not accessible from any room other than the anteroom/kitchen of the church complex (B6).

Another large room (B10) was excavated to the West of B8–9 (plate 6). It showed clear traces of damage occurred in antiquity; indeed, a roughly trapezoidal mud-brick buttress was uncovered against the East wall of the room, likely built to support it after a rather poor restoration. Evidence of at least two different floors was found above *gebel*, together with remains of a North-South wall at foundation level along the West wall. A hearth was uncovered in good conditions in the Southern half of B10; a large amount of pottery fragments and a few complete or almost complete vessels were collected above floor level throughout the room.

The vessels and the large amount of pottery fragments that were uncovered during the 2007 excavation season were recorded and drawn by the ceramicist. The diagnostic pieces were analyzed and a digital catalogue of forms and fabrics was begun, including the evidence collected both in 2006 and 2007. A preliminary study of this corpus of material led to the identification of a rather homogeneous chronological range for the ceramics found at Ain el-Gedida, spanning from the end of the third century to the early fifth century CE.

Several small finds were uncovered and collected throughout the site during the excavation season; they include one Greek ostrakon, about two dozen coins ranging from the second half of the third century to the second half of the fourth century CE, three lamps, a few complete or almost complete vessels, a broken bronze ear-ring, and some fragments of wooden objects. All the finds have been cleaned, numbered, and photographed; written records were created for each of them and their analysis begun.

On the last four days of the excavation season, the church and the adjoining rooms that were the object of archaeological investigation this year were partially backfilled; particular attention was paid to features that were more in danger of collapse or damage, such as the staircase (B8) and doorways without lintels in rooms B6, B9, and B10; furthermore, the graffiti on the West and North walls of room B6 were protected with temporary mud-brick screens placed at a short distance in front of them, with the space in between filled with clean sand.

The topographers added the plans of the rooms that were excavated in 2007 to the overall site plan. Scalable photographs of the walls and floors of rooms B5–9 and A46 were taken and then elaborated for photogrammetrical analysis. Sections and profiles of the church were also drawn. A microrelief of the area covering the five mounds of Ain el-Gedida was created, with the goal of collecting precise information about the geo-morphology of the site. In addition to the fixed point created in 2006, two more survey triangulation points were set in the ground on the West and North

edges of Mound I. These will allow the future recording of topographical data to be carried out in a fashion coherent with the work done in 2007.

Permission was granted to study the objects that had been collected during the SCA excavations in 1994–5 and brought to the Kharga Museum. They were drawn, recorded, and photographed in the museum. Their publication will be carried out together with the results of the excavations in collaboration with the SCA; the systematic study of all documentation has already begun.

Bibliography

Aravecchia, Nicola. "Ain el-Gedida: Results from the 2006 Field Season." Forthcoming.

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Plates



Plate 1: Mound I (Areas A-B).

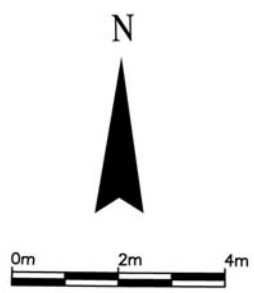


Plate 2: church complex.



Plate 3: rooms B5 and A46, view to the NW.



Plate 4: room B6 and corridor B7, partial view to the NE.



Plate 5: staircase B8, view to the W.



Plate 6: rooms B9 (in the foreground) and B10 (in the background to the right), view to the S.