

Called Back to Luxor: The Salvage Archaeology Field School-2

Early January 2010 found an AERA team in Luxor within a stone's throw of the Nile River, atop a long mound nearly two stories high. The mound, a chunk of old Luxor, encompassed 2,000 years of stratified buildings and living floors. The team— instructors and students of the second AERA/ARCE Salvage Archaeology Field School (SAFS-2)—had a mandate to take the mound down to ground level in seven weeks, excavating stratigraphically; that is, recording and excavating each single deposit separately.

Rising Again to a Call from Luxor

Last year when we laid plans for our 2010 field season, we did not envision a Luxor mission. In October, however, Mansour Boraik, General Director of Luxor for the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), put out a call for help. The last remnant of the old town mound within the Luxor Temple archaeological preserve was coming down as part of the redevelopment of the site for tourism.

Old Luxor rose upon a mound of its own building, demolition, dumping, and rebuilding. By medieval Islamic times, the town had risen within and around Luxor Temple seven meters (23 feet) above the level of the New Kingdom floor and even higher to the north.

Starting in the 1880s, antiquities authorities cleared the town from inside the temple. Between 1958 and 1962 they removed most of the old town mound to the north, demolishing nearly

2,000 years' accumulation of houses and settlement deposits, 7 to 9 meters (23 to 30 feet) thick, dating from Roman, medieval, and early modern periods. The authorities left standing a piece of the mound behind two early 20th century "palaces" that cut down into the deposits.

Mansour asked AERA and the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) for help in removing what was left of the mound while continuing to train SCA inspectors. This training had begun with the first AERA/ARCE field school in rescue archaeology in 2008 (see AERAGRAM 9/1) when we excavated farther north along the Avenue of the Sphinxes (see photo on page 6).

So, with the approval of Dr. Zahi Hawass, Vice Minister of Culture and SCA Chairman, we launched a second salvage field school excavation. As with SAFS 2008, our task was to save information from archaeological deposits slated for complete removal.

In less than three months, Co-Field School Directors Mohsen Kamel and Ana Tavares pulled the SAFS-2 together. They could not have done this without the help of Dr. Gerry Scott, Director of ARCE, who provided emergency funding; John Shearman, ARCE Associate Director in Luxor who provided trucks, transportation, tents, and team lunches; and Janie Abd al-Aziz, Grants Administrator, who provided financial advice and reviewed the budget.

Tackling the Mound

On January 9, 31 students, 14 supervisors, 3 professional contract archaeology instructors, and 60 workers assembled for the first day of the mission. Students came from a large pool of applicants whom we had interviewed in November. The supervisors, all SCA inspectors, had graduated from the AERA Beginners and Advanced Field Schools and worked with the first SAFS in Luxor.

For the first few days, students and supervisors practiced basic surveying and recording skills, as workmen cleared away debris from the recent demolition of the southern palace. Normally, we spend more time with basics in our Beginners Field School. But the SAFS-2 had a mission, and if they did not carry it out, information might be lost forever!

The excavation students, in four teams, took to the mound with only a few days of basic training. They found themselves learning to swim, so to speak, after being thrown in the water. The work quickly became very hard and demanding.

Two SAFS-2 teams mapped the features showing in the sides of the mound. In the eastern face, the 1958–62 excavations chopped through a very large mudbrick building (Structure 3), with five gaping rooms full of mudbrick tumble. On the west the removal of one of the palaces exposed the cut through the mound that the palace builders made

a hundred years ago. Here much modern refuse filled spaces between what was left of the walls.

Two other excavation groups mapped the top of the mound (the "Summit"), while one group worked at the southeastern corner documenting the "Red Zone" of burnt earth left by industrial activity during the Roman period. They also recorded a wide trench that a University of Chicago team, directed by Donald Whitcomb and Janet Johnson, excavated in 1985.

Layers Through Time

The excavations on the Summit were like an elevator descending through time down into a standing island of Luxor life that once spread hundreds of meters along the Nile. With truly professional efficiency, under the guidance of Field Director Mohsen Kamel and Senior Archaeologist James Taylor, the team took down this testament of bygone times.

In the first week, they came into intimate contact with the detritus of early 20th century life left by palace servants in the ruins of their small quarters (Structures 1 and 2): old letters, bottles, clay pigeon houses, and even magical spells. A hundred years ago, masons built the walls of these back rooms on foundations of reused sandstone and alabaster blocks with hieroglyphic fragments taken from pharaonic monuments—perhaps pieces of Luxor Temple itself. They set the foundation stones into the ash and mudbrick debris layers left from the destruction and abandonment of the previous phase.

The SAFS-2 teams, working their way down layer by layer, next pulled away a black velvet shroud of ash draped over the entire Summit, a covering that disintegrated and billowed up into their faces. The extremely fine powder, noxious to the lungs, required all excavators to wear surgical masks. By day's end these dedicated diggers looked like chimney sweeps!

Fragment of an Ancient Neighborhood

The team worked down through the mudbrick tumble, enormous debris-filled pits, and collapsed roofing left from the



Taking down the mound, from the top clockwise: Mapping the summit of the mound prior to excavation. Clearing the west side of the mound. Mapping the floor of a medieval building. The mound nearly down to ground level with a Roman Building exposed.



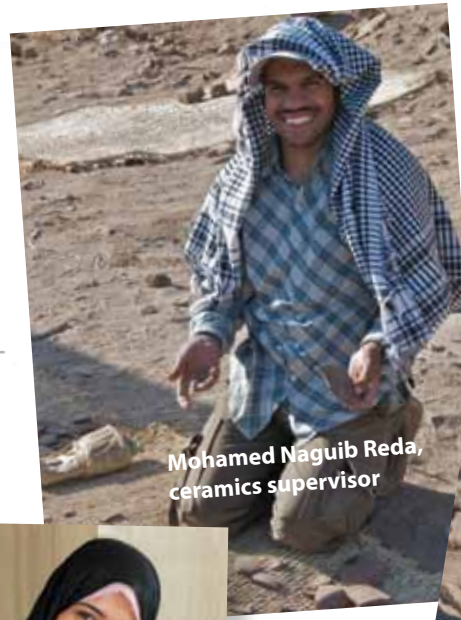
Before the SAFS-2 team tackled the mound, workmen cleared rubble that had been strewn over it when an adjacent building was demolished.



LTM2010
CONTOUR MAP
Pre excavation



Ashraf Abd el-Aziz, instructor, and Ahmed Hassan Amin



Mohamed Naguib Reda, ceramics supervisor



Momen Saad, supervisor



Shaima Montasser, supervisor



Susan Sobhi Azeer, objects registrar



Marwa Nour el-Din Ahmed



Mahmoud Abdallah Mohamed



Mohamed Abd el-Aziz Gabr, Ahmed Abd el-Nazeer, and Ramadan Ali Mohamed



- mudbrick
- redbrick
- grid point

Contour drawing of the Luxor Town Mound prior to excavation. Prepared by SAFS-2. All photos on pages 4 and 5 by Jason Quinlan.

destruction of the next oldest horizon of ancient buildings. By the end of January, underlying ruins of ancient houses saw light for the first time in possibly half a millennium.

Provisionally, this complex cannot be later than the 10th century in date. Its mudbrick walls stood as high as a meter (3.3 feet). The complex extended across the whole of the Summit (and who knows how much farther in its day), and consisted of at least 11 rooms arranged around a central courtyard with a red brick floor. Parts of several houses made up this fragment of an ancient neighborhood. Capturing this slice through time in old Luxor was like grasping only a fragment of an ancient papyrus text, while the rest of the manuscript had already vanished forever.

But there was no time to linger. The team had to work on as the “elevator” descended deeper in time. As soon as they had mapped the walls, grain silos, storage bins, and pavements, SAFS-2 team members deconstructed each piece. Their three-dimensional mapping will allow the whole to be put back together—graphically—like an archaeological LEGO set. Such is the goal of stratigraphic excavation and recording.

Once they had “captured” the remains of this medieval neighborhood, Summit teams worked down through demolition and ash layers underneath. After seven weeks in the wind, dust, cold, and then extreme heat, they had to pick up the pace, now frantic to reveal underlying structures.

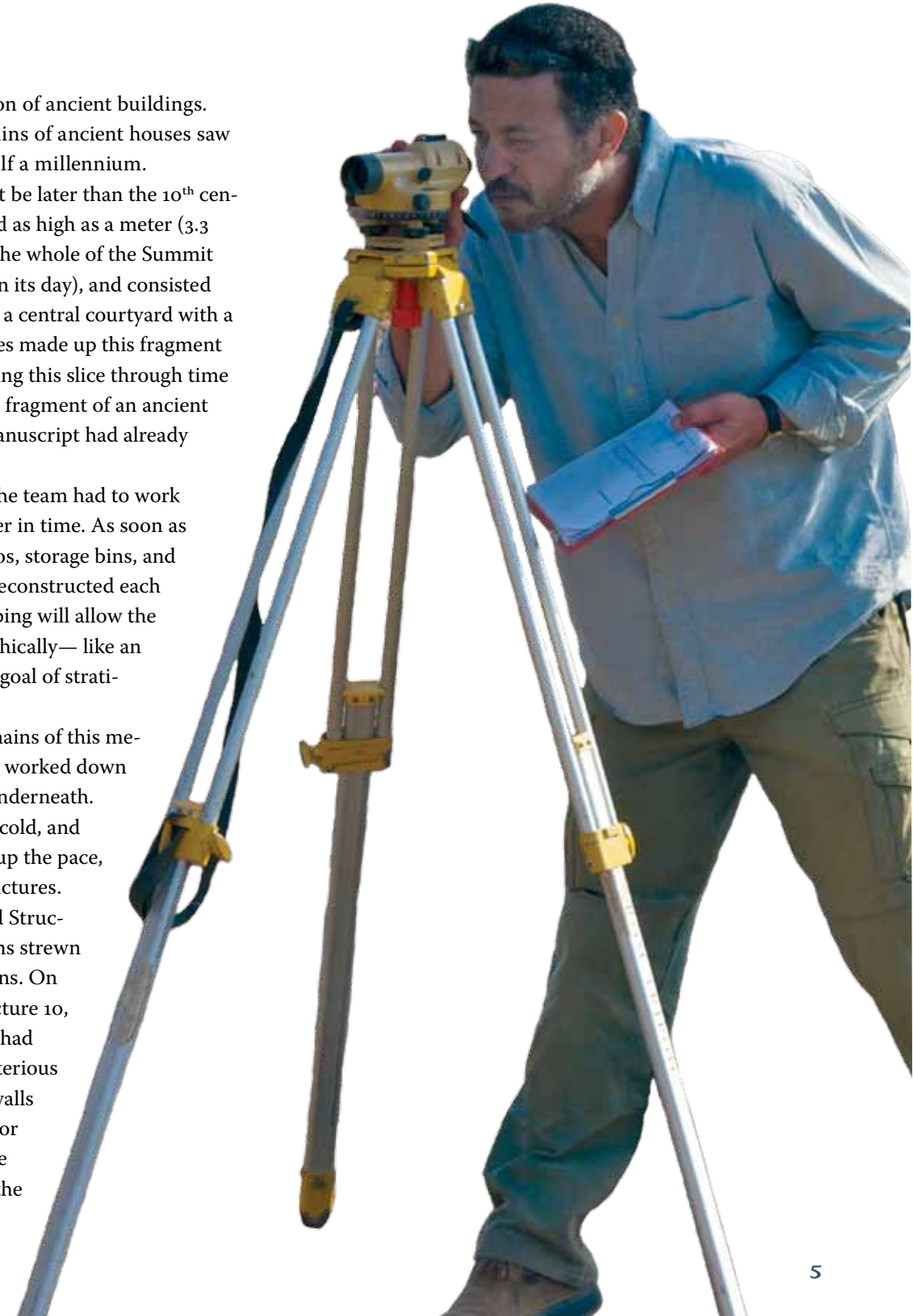
On Summit north they uncovered Structure 9, a series of chambers with coins strewn across the floors and a pot full of coins. On Summit south, they uncovered Structure 10, where the remains of vaulted rooms had seen heat so intense from some mysterious industry that the three-meter-high walls (almost 10 feet) had literally melted, or vitrified. Long drips of silica from the molten mudbrick ran down toward the scorched-red floors.

Roman Period Complex in Phase

By the end of the season, the excavators on the Summit had brought the mound close to the mandated ground level and “into phase” with the structures articulated by other field school groups in the eastern, western, and southern sides of the site.

The Luxor Town Mound was now like the skeleton of an overturned boat. One long, thick wall ran keel-like north to

Field Director Mohsen Kamel uses the auto-level to take elevations.



south for the length of the mound. Perpendicular walls to the west defined the vitrified and coin-strewn chambers of Structures 9 and 10. Perpendicular walls to the east formed the chambers of Structure 3.

One SAFS-2 team of excavators had been working in Structure 3 all season. At the southern end they found holes punched through the thick keel-wall between the vaulted, vitrified chambers of Structure 10 and the lower-lying chambers of Structure 3, in which they found bins, benches, and bakeries with round ovens and hearths in small niches.

Meanwhile, the team at the southern base of the mound had expanded from Structure 11 under the Red Zone, at the southeast corner, to the southwest. Here they revealed Structure 12, which included a beautifully plastered, painted room of the Roman period, complete with decorative apsidal niche. The whole complex appears, provisionally, to date to the Roman period.

Mission Accomplished!

The second Salvage Archaeology Field School finished excavations on February 25 with its basic mission largely accomplished in seven weeks. The team stratigraphically excavated the remnant of

the Luxor Town Mound nearly down to its western base, just slightly above the level of the nearby corniche (river road).

The work had been tricky and precarious: in places the Summit was only 2.10 to 3 meters (7 to 9.8 feet) wide. Excavators had to be careful not to tumble off the edge while troweling, drawing, writing, bagging artifacts, and photographing, often in clouds of ash and dust whipped up by wind. The work had been physically hard, up and down the mound many times a day, standing long hours in precarious positions, hacking away with mattocks or scraping with trowels (archaeologists and workers together).

During the final, eighth week, SAFS-2 members bore down on the less glamorous, but utterly essential, post-excavation chores. They processed their data, producing a good quality archive (including hundreds of drawings and stratigraphic feature forms) and prepared a full assessment report, documenting what they found. They knew all of this was critical if we were to leave Luxor confident that others could take up where they left off. Much archaeology remains to be done on the ancient town inside the Luxor Temple enclosure.

The success of SAFS-2 reinforces our realization that the field schools, so gen-

erously supported by the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) through USAID funds, can be a formidable—yet efficient—archaeological force.

Acknowledgements

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Autos, clothes, appliances—most of the things people manufacture—change over time. An object's style can peg it to a particular time period. An avocado green GE refrigerator shouts late 1960s to early 1970s; a stainless steel GE fridge says 2000s and later.

Ceramics are no exception. Indeed, pottery probably has changed more over time than other classes of artifacts. Early on, archaeologists discovered that they could use pottery sequences—the gradual change in pottery styles over time—for dating sites. Archaeologists working in Egypt rely heavily on pottery sequences for assigning a first approximate date to surface finds and for fine dating features

2,000 Years of Pottery Begin to Fill a Void

and strata within sites, even more so since pottery is the most ubiquitous find class at any Egyptian archaeological site.

When we began the SAFS-2, published ceramics sequences for Roman through modern times were lacking in the Luxor area.* So the Luxor Town Mound offered a unique opportunity to develop a local sequence that was sorely missing. Because it was stratified, spanning more than 2,000 years with successive well-preserved architectural/archaeological phases, and was about to be carefully excavated, the Luxor Town Mound was the ideal source for ceramic sequence material. We could date the pottery by its precise archaeological context and establish temporal relationships between different types. As it turned out, the mound yielded an extraordinarily large, diverse collection of ceramics—including a remarkable quantity of whole pots—from all levels, providing exceptional material for the sequence.

Our dedicated ceramics team eagerly took on this challenging opportunity. The ceramicists, supervisors, and SAFS-2 ceramics students processed thousands of sherds, documenting the pottery with

comprehensive records of all attributes, such as shape, dimensions, clay type, color, porosity, and hardness. With the help of the SAFS-2 students specializing in illustration, they prepared 700 drawings.

The team's efforts form the basis for developing a ceramic sequence, but one that is still highly preliminary and needs more work to tease out the intricate differences between the pottery assemblages in the various habitation layers of the site. With just seven weeks of analysis, the ceramicists only had time to process a limited amount of material from selected contexts critical for dating. They have not yet “worked out” the sequence, nor have they looked at the pottery from throughout the entire mound, nor established the range of types from the contexts they did study. That information will also be crucial for determining activities in the settlement.

When the ceramicists complete all the analysis during future study seasons, their ceramic sequence, covering almost 2,000 years of Egyptian history, will become an extremely important reference and fill a void in the archaeology of the Luxor region. The ceramic sequence will probably be the most valuable product of the SAFS-2 work.

Above: Elham el-Taweil glues a pot back together. Photo by Jason Quinlan.

*Tôd, a site in the Luxor area, furnished material from the Ptolemaic up to the Early Islamic Period. However, these ceramics came from contexts that were not well stratified.

Luxor Temple (left), Avenue of the Sphinxes (right), and the last remnant of the Luxor Town Mound, adjacent to the remaining early 20th century “palace.” Beyond lie the Nile and the West Bank. Photo by Jason Quinlan.



Salvage Archaeology Field School-2

Archaeology Teams

1. SUPERVISORS: James Taylor, Saad Bakhit Abd el-Hafiz, and Ali Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim. STUDENTS: Megahid Abd el-Mawgoud Mohamed, El Zahara Ragab Mahmoud, Khadija Ahmed Ali Mohamed, Ibrahim Ahmed Metwalli Mohamed, and Shaimaa Mahmoud Shahat.
2. SUPERVISORS: Amelia Fairman, Hanan Mahmoud, and Momen Saad. STUDENTS: Ahmed Moustafa Saber Ahmed, Ahmed Abd el-Nazeer Abd el-Wareth, Mohamed Abd el-Aziz Gabr, Reda Mohamed Abd el-Rahim, and Ramadan Ali Mohamed.
3. SUPERVISORS: Ashraf Abd el-Aziz, Daniel Jones, Rabea Eissa, and Hussein Rikaby. STUDENTS: Mahmoud Salim Mohamed, Ahmed Hassan Amin,

Osama Moustafa Mohamed el-Nahas, Mohamed Mansour Boraik, and Amr Zakaria Mohamed.

4. SUPERVISORS: Daniel Eddisford, Shaima Montasser, and Mohamed Ahmed Abd el-Rahman. STUDENTS: Mostafa Mohamed Saleh Taha, Mohamed Hussein Ahmed Hussein, Abdel Rahim Mahmoud Ahmed, Mohamed Zarad Shaaban Hassan, and Marwa Nour el-Dine Ahmed Mohamed.

Illustration Team

SUPERVISORS: Yasser Mahmoud Hussein, and Hassan Ramadan Mahmoud. STUDENTS: El Sayed Mamdouh el-Sayed, Said Ebrahim Abd el-Hamid el-Assal, Entesar Mohamed Eid Saif el-Deen, Adel Kamel Tohamy, Haibatallah Abdallah Mohamed, Amel Nasr Mohamed Ewieda, and Mahmoud Abdellah Mohamed.

Ceramics Team

SUPERVISORS: Aurelia Masson Berghoff, Bettina Bader, Pamela Rose, Elham Ahmed Mohamoud el-Taweil, and Mohamed Naguib Reda. STUDENTS: Ahmed Saddiq Tawfiq, Mohamed Mostafa Abdallah, Ashraf Sobhy Rezkallah, Atef Ibrahim Ali, and Mostafa Amin Mostafa.

Support Staff

Salvage archaeologist: Dan Jones
 Surveyor: Mohamed Abd el-Baset
 Objects Registrar: Susan Sobhi Azeer
 Photographer: Jason Quinlan
 Archivist: Manami Yahata
 Accountant: Safinaz Ouri
 Bookkeeper & Administrator: Mari Rygh