

The Ashmolean in Egypt

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Ancient Hierakonpolis – Greek for ‘City of the Hawk’ – is located on the west bank of the Nile, about 650 km south of Cairo. At its peak, around 3600–3200 BC, Hierakonpolis was one of the largest urban centres in the Nile Valley.

The site is well represented in the Ashmolean collection, which houses over 1,000 objects from excavations conducted there in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since 2015 the Museum has been the institutional home of the Hierakonpolis Expedition. This international team of archaeologists is unearthing new evidence for the formation of ancient Egyptian civilisation in the region.

During the 2018 field season the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities granted permission for a conservation assessment of stone monuments on the ancient town and temple mound. In particular we hoped to examine and document the pink granite ‘stela’ of King Pepi I (6th Dynasty, about 2293–2259 BC), which was excavated in the temple area in 1897. The object is mentioned in the field reports and included on the temple plan, but the excavators did not publish a photograph or drawing showing the details.

The block was left on site after attempts to move it failed. Photographs taken in 1989 show the decorated surface partially exposed and covered with salt encrustations. It was subsequently reburied to provide protection from seasonal fluctuations in the water table and to prevent further degradation. The precise location of the block was then lost as the site became covered with halfa (a rough perennial) grass and other debris.

We were able to relocate the object using a combination of earlier site plans and a Gamma Ray Spectrometry survey, the latter conducted by Akram Aziz and Tamer Attia from the Faculty of Science, Port Said University. Sub-surface concentrations of the radioactive elements potassium, thorium and uranium – characteristic of granite – indicated the likely position of the buried stone. The surrounding area was cleared to investigate these results.

After removing the halfa grass, we were initially faced with an unpleasant salty hole, but our spirits rose as the block slowly re-emerged. Once fully exposed, the ‘stela’ was found to be sitting in a pool of saline water. The decorated front face was in good condition, but salt deposits obscured some of the carved details. These could have caused further damage if left untreated, so the surfaces were cleaned using brushes and wooden sticks. The more compacted deposits were removed using dental tools, while the hardest encrustations were softened with a 5 per cent solution of sodium hexametaphosphate (used as a dispersing agent to break down clay and other soil types) and rinsed with water.

Thanks to such close examination, we quickly realised that what had been described as a free-standing granite stela was in fact a door jamb. It was about 3.7 m long, 84 cm wide and 46 cm thick. The upper part is inscribed with the titulary of King Pepi I, beneath which he is depicted standing before a goddess – either Isis or Hathor – and the falcon-headed god Horus. One side of the block is rough for setting into a mudbrick wall, while the inner face is worked smooth. The rounded tenon at the bottom would have enabled the block to stand upright in its original position.

Having recorded the decoration, we considered various options for preserving the block, including relocating it to a drier part of the site. In the end we decided to rebury it temporarily until a more permanent solution can be devised. The water surrounding the lower end was removed and the trench partially filled with coarse, free-draining gravel. A layer of fine sand was added beneath and around the stone up to the inscribed area. The decorated surface was covered with canvas to protect it from soil and to allow water and salt to evaporate. Finally, more sand was added over the entire block to a height of between 30 and 40 cm to minimise the formation of salts on the drying surface.

The rediscovery of the door jamb raises some important questions. Given its size and weight, it presumably toppled over close to its original position. Can the other jamb and lintel be far away? What was the nature of the building to which this monumental doorway gave access? Was it part of the site's early temple, from which several spectacular objects discovered in 1897–9 are presumed to originate? We hope to continue investigating this part of the site in future seasons, so watch this space.