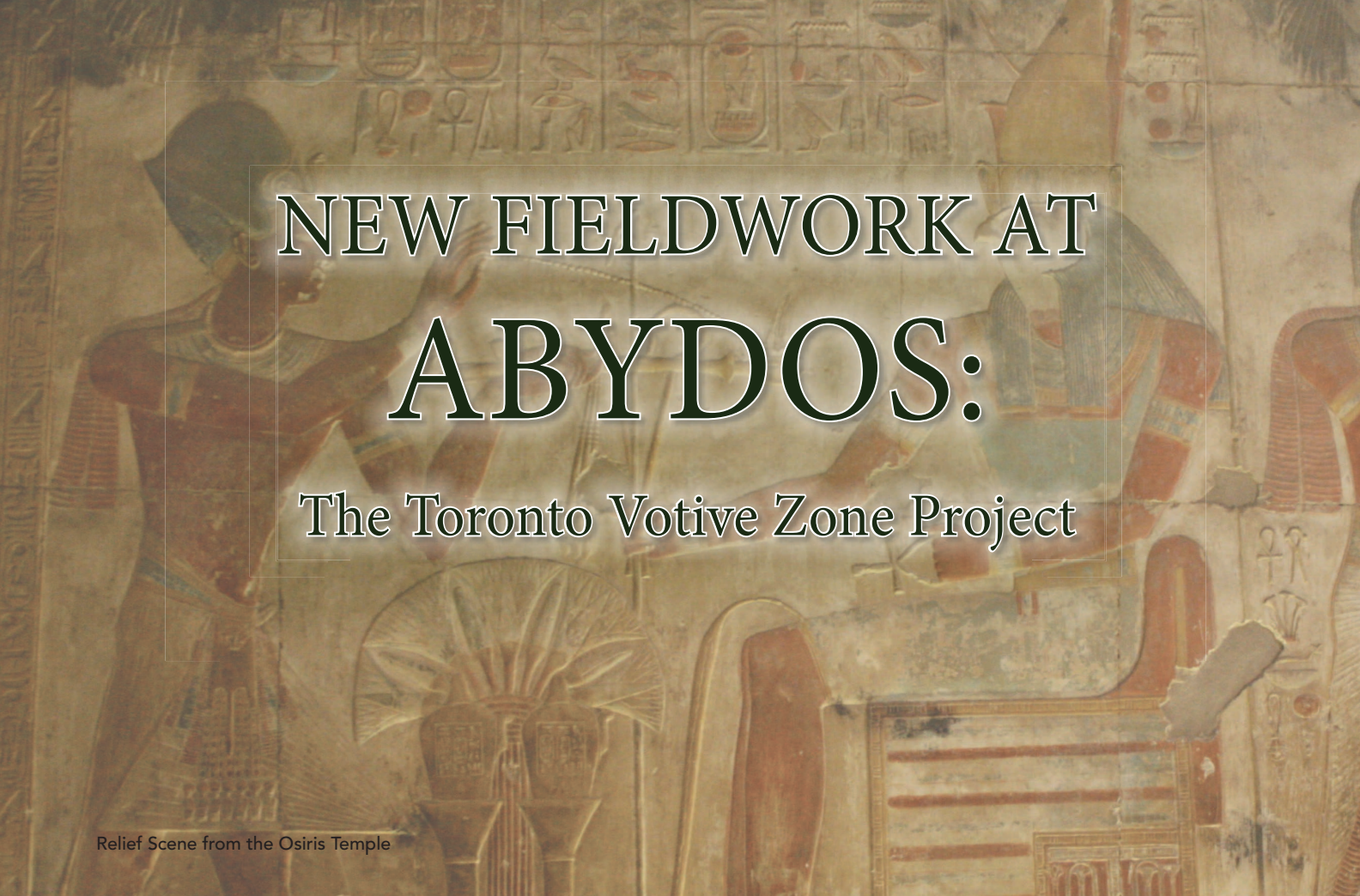




NEW FIELDWORK AT ABYDOS:

The Toronto Votive Zone Project

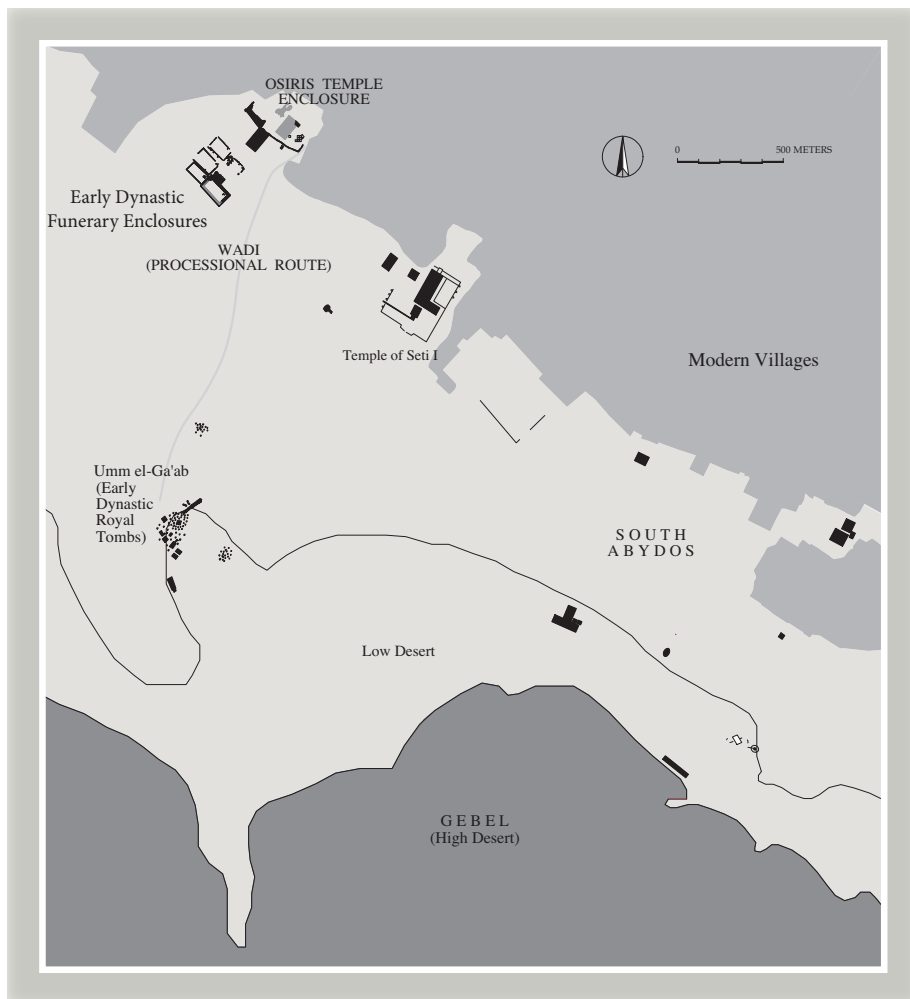
Relief Scene from the Osiris Temple

Mary-Ann Pouls Wegner

The resumption of archaeological fieldwork at the Abydos Votive Zone site during the summer of 2011 produced a wealth of new information about the development of this symbolically charged area adjacent to the main temple of Osiris, the god associated with postmortem regeneration. Among the many remarkable artifacts recovered through excavation are the remains of a wooden figure of a hawk's head that likely formed the aegis of a ceremonial barque shrine used to transport a portable image of the deity Horus across the desert landscape and a rare example of a royal wooden statue that may depict the female ruler Hatshepsut. The royal statue could also have been associated with a barque shrine, portraying the king as a supporter of the cult of the local triad of deities (Osiris, Isis, and Horus) and as a recipient of the gods' favor in his (or her) role of god's "son." The exposure of a previously undocumented monumental structure with many phases of use attests to the significant involvement of the Egyptian state in the development of the built environment of the site. In addition, the excavation of a Middle Kingdom offering chapel that was left standing and continued to be a focal point for offerings more than 1,500 years after its initial construction provides insight into the use

of the past and the role of memory in the long-term development of this ceremonial context.

The Votive Zone site comprises the area between the Osiris Temple Enclosure/Kom es-Sultan and the North Cemetery (see figs. 1 and 2). The site's topography reflects its function within the ceremonial landscape of North Abydos, adjacent to the main local temple precinct and bordering on the route of a ritual procession in which images of Osiris, Horus, Wepwawet, and perhaps other deities were carried in boat-shaped shrines nearly a kilometer from the dwelling of Osiris in the temple to his notional tomb to the local west at the site of Umm el-Ga'ab. The processional festival, as recorded in commemorative inscriptions on private stelae set up during the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2055–1650 B.C.E.) and subsequently removed in the course of unsystematic digging in the late 1800s (Simpson 1974; O'Connor 1985), featured a dramatic reenactment of the main elements of the Osiris myth, in which the god and archetypical king was murdered by his envious brother Seth, then magically regenerated through the attentions of his wife/sister Isis long enough to conceive a son (Horus), who once he had reached adulthood summoned Seth to the divine tribunal and was awarded the kingship of Egypt as his birthright. Among the many layers of meaning that the myth



processional route linking the two loci of intense ritual activity associated with the cult of Osiris rendered it an important feature of the sacred landscape of Abydos and connected it functionally to the temple and its associated industrial and occupational areas. Investigations during the 2011 field season¹ focused on the areas immediately to the local west and north of the small temple of Thutmose III discovered in the Votive Zone in 1996 (Pouls Wegner 2002), aimed at understanding the horizontal stratigraphy of the site. Specifically, through the analysis of deposits in a series of excavation units running across the zone, perpendicular to the processional route itself, the research design sought to test the hypothesis that the boundary constraining nonroyal construction in the Votive Zone shifted to the local south over time, particularly between the Middle Kingdom and the later New Kingdom (ca. 2055–1150 B.C.E.), in response to ongoing encroachment by private individuals. This

Figure 1 (left). Map adapted from Kemp 1975 based on survey data compiled by the Pennsylvania-Yale-Institute of Fine Arts Expedition to Abydos. Survey and graphics: Mary-Ann Pouls Wegner.

Figure 2. The North Abydos Votive Zone site.

embodied were the successful postmortem transformation of the deceased and the reification of the hereditary transmission of kingship. Osiris was the archetype for regeneration and the arbiter of access to the blessed afterlife, and individuals sought to become *an* Osiris after death. The importance of Osiris to conceptions of the afterlife led to the growth of Abydos as a major ceremonial center that drew individuals to participate in the festival, deposit votive offerings, and construct offering chapels as a means of guaranteeing their own afterlife existence. The patrilineal ideal expressed in the Osiris myth encouraged rulers to patronize the local cult institution as a means of expressing their legitimacy. At both the royal and nonroyal level, votive activity at the site provided a mechanism for the expression and negotiation of individual identity. Analysis of the built environment and patterning in the assemblages of material culture associated with the Votive Zone therefore sheds significant light on social organization and agency in ancient Egypt.

Research Program

The project's research program focuses on examination of the spatial and chronological components of the site's development and its relationship to other elements of the greater Abydos landscape. The proximity of the Votive Zone to the

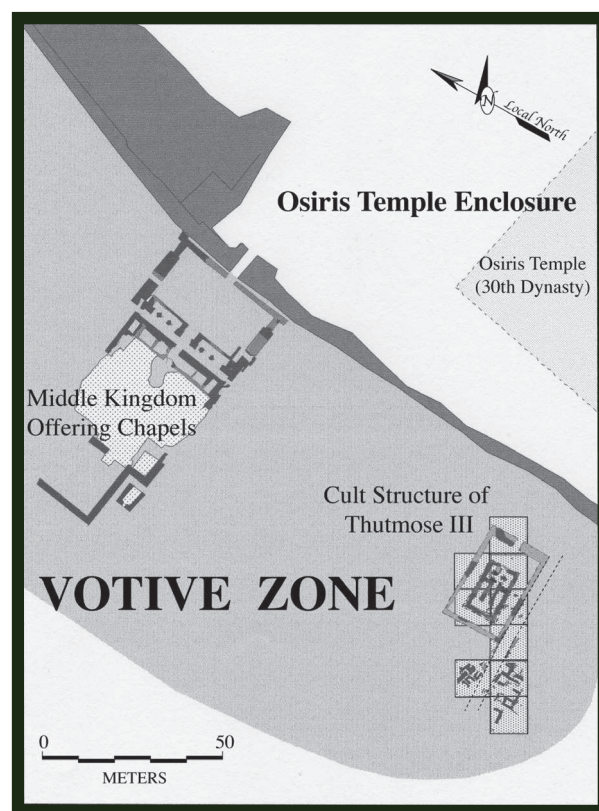




Figure 3. Mudbrick offering chapel of Middle Kingdom date, which was left standing and continued to function as a locus for offerings while a complex of state-initiated structures developed in the Votive Zone during the New Kingdom and subsequent periods.

model of diachronic development would correlate with the gradual expansion of interments in the nearby North Cemetery from a core area closest to the Osiris temple precinct to the local south and west over the same period of time (Richards 2005, 158).

Middle Kingdom Offering Chapel

Interestingly, the 2011 excavations conclusively disproved that hypothesis regarding the diachronic spatial development of the Votive Zone site. The discovery of a preserved mudbrick offering chapel of Middle Kingdom date immediately adjacent to the processional route as it existed in the New Kingdom, with its boundary demarcated by the small temple of Thutmose III and adjacent paved roadway leading to the local west, demonstrated the continuity of the boundary location in periods subsequent to the Middle Kingdom. A photograph of the excavated chapel is provided in figure 3. The fact that this structure was left standing, with its walls still preserved to a height of 1.28 m above the original floor level, and preserved stratified archaeological deposits associated with continued offering activity well into the Late Period suggests that it

was considered an important element of the built environment of the processional route long after its initial construction. Although the stone stela that would originally have stood against its local western wall was no longer *in situ*, the width of that stela is discernable from impressions in the mud-plaster that held it in place. The width dimension of the now-missing stela falls at the very top of the range of known stelae from North Abydos (Mariette 1880; Simpson 1974), suggesting that it commemorated an individual or group of high socioeconomic status. The identity of the chapel's owner(s) may have influenced the decision to leave the monument standing, while other nearby chapels of similar date were razed to make way for later construction.

The dating of the offering chapel to the Middle Kingdom was made on the basis of a comparison of its angle of orientation with that of the exposed Middle Kingdom offering chapels in the Portal Temple area (excavated by the then Pennsylvania-Yale Expedition in 1967–1979; O'Connor 1985; 2009, 86–119) and detailed analysis of the mudbricks used in its construction. The orientation of the structure correlates closely with that of the known offering chapels of the Middle Kingdom, which differs systematically from that of the New Kingdom structures

Figure 4. View of the monumental structure during excavation. The mudbrick walls are 2 m thick and retain significant traces of whitewashed mud plaster on their surfaces. Limestone blocks were used to provide structural support for doorways at the foundation level.



at the site. The dimensions and fabric of the bricks used in the construction of the newly discovered offering chapel correspond closely with those of the previously excavated Middle Kingdom chapels to the local north. An examination of the pottery sherds found in the bricks and mortar of the Votive Zone offering chapel produced no post-Middle Kingdom material, further corroborating its date in that period.

Monumental Structure

To the local north of the Thutmose III temple, two units were selected for excavation to provide a stratigraphic connection between the dense complex of the Eighteenth Dynasty and subsequent structures immediately adjacent to the processional route and the Ramesside Portal Temple in the center of the Votive Zone site. The topography of this area featured a high mound comprising the spoil heap from one of Auguste Mariette's deep nineteenth-century excavation pits, which had exposed well-built mudbrick walls still visible on the modern surface but undocumented in prior excavation reports. These units revealed the remains of a large structure with mud-plastered and white-washed mudbrick walls 2 m thick, some preserved to a height of more than 3 m above the level of the floor (see fig. 4). The brick size and fabric suggests a date in the later New Kingdom for the structure, perhaps contemporary with the Portal Temple of Ramesses II nearby. Limestone blocks incorporated into the foundation under doorways in the building provided structural integrity for the massive walls. Impressions left in the mud plaster indicate that the structure's interior doorways also had stone jambs. Although no stone elements were preserved *in situ*, recovered fragments carved in sunk relief stylistically similar to that observed in the Portal Temple may provide an additional indication of a Ramesside date for the original construction of this monumental building. However, it is clear that there are multiple building phases associated with the structure, including a second major phase of construction in the Third Intermediate Period.

The monumental structure was only partly excavated in the 2011 season, and its function remains unknown. Its dimensions are at least 22.2 x 15.4 m. In plan it appears to be approximately square, with a transverse corridor on the local east side and three parallel longitudinal chambers oriented east-west at the rear (west). Such a layout would be consistent with traditional temple architecture, exemplified in the small temple of Thutmose III located just 10 m to the local south of this structure. The thickness of the interior walls suggests that it was a state-initiated construction.

Later phases of use of the monumental building show a shift to private agency. During the Third Intermediate Period, a large tomb was constructed in the local northern chamber of the large structure, utilizing the parallel foundation walls of the earlier building and incorporating new thinner mudbrick walls built at the local east and west ends (fig. 5). The tomb structure was cut down through the original floor level of the monumental building and accessed via a ramp on the local east, leading down from the original doorway of the long chamber. The ramp itself was plastered with mud, and its surface preserved lenses of numerous water-laid deposits perhaps associated with the offering of libations to the tomb owner. The tomb walls and ceiling vault were plastered, and white-wash remains on the interior wall surfaces.

At some time before our excavations, the tomb had been robbed via a hole made in the western side of the vault. A deposit of material, including disarticulated human remains, pottery, and a large quantity of wood, was found immediately adjacent to the robbers' hole and likely represents a secondary context associated with a specific robbing event.

Initially the deposit was interpreted as the remains of a number of human burials in wooden coffins that had been interred in the tomb in one phase of reuse. This interpretation of the disarticulated human remains and pottery may still hold true. However, further analysis of the wood revealed the presence in this deposit of a large carved wooden representation of the head of a hawk wearing a tripartite wig (shown in fig. 6). The head is flat on the bottom; a square mortise hole in the top of the head indicates that it would have been provided with a headdress or crown. Although the head is in poor condition due to the activity of white ants, careful cleaning of the layer of frass (insect waste) on its surface revealed traces of brightly



Figure 5. Third Intermediate Period tomb constructed in one of the long chambers of the monumental structure in a secondary building phase. The hole in the vault of the tomb was made by tomb robbers who removed material from the structure at some time prior to the 2011 field season.



Figure 6. Remains of a carved wooden figure of a hawk's head, probably comprising the aegis of a portable barque shrine of Horus used in ritual processions.

painted plaster featuring white and blue vertical striping of the wig, a red skin tone on the face, and a yellow beak. These characteristics strongly suggest that the artifact is an aegis from either the prow or stern of the barque shrine of the god Horus, who played a major role in the local Osiris cult. Other wooden elements recovered from the same deposit may be parts of the barque. Relief depictions of the barque of Horus, showing very similar attributes, are preserved in the Seti I temple in Middle Abydos as illustrated in figure 7 (Calverley and Broome 1933, pls. 26, 27). Although such iconographic representations of sacred barques are known from relief scenes in New Kingdom temples, actual artifactual remains are extremely rare. Components of a barque shrine were recovered from Tell Gumaïyima, near Tanis (Griffith 1888, 37–47, pls. 18–21), and bronze standards depicting erect royal sphinxes that adorned divine barques are known (Hill 2004, 135). Existing large-scale aegi that can be associated with divine barques include a large bronze head of a ram in the Metropolitan Museum (MMA 45.2.9) that has long been identified as a component of the aegis from a barque of Amon, a royal head in the Louvre (E2522), and a bronze aegis of Hathor or Isis, also in the Louvre (N3960). Of

this small corpus, the Abydos Votive Zone aegis is the only example deriving from a secure archaeological context.

Further analysis of this context may allow for the reconstruction of its complex depositional history. While many of the archaeological deposits associated with the monumental structure were highly disturbed, the hawk-head aegis and other material in the assemblage came from a sealed, intact deposit that can be securely linked to the robbing of the tomb. The pottery in the assemblage is datable to the Persian period (ca. 525–332 B.C.E.) by its form and fabric, providing a *terminus post quem* date for the removal of the material from the tomb and its deposition next to the hole in the vault. Whether the wooden aegis was made in that period or is rather an older element of cult equipment stored in the reused tomb remains unknown, but calibrated radiocarbon dating of the artifact may help to resolve the question of its date of manufacture.

Third Intermediate Period Tomb and Subsequent Phases of Use

Other clues to the history of use of the tomb structure were left behind by robbers. A large quantity of faience shabtis (funerary figurines) was recovered from the fill of the tomb and from disturbed areas surrounding it, and the majority of these derive from a single set that can be dated stylistically to the earlier part of the Third Intermediate Period. They are likely associated with the initial phase of the tomb's use, and an inscription preserved in a vertical band running down the front of the worker figures provides an important indication of the title and

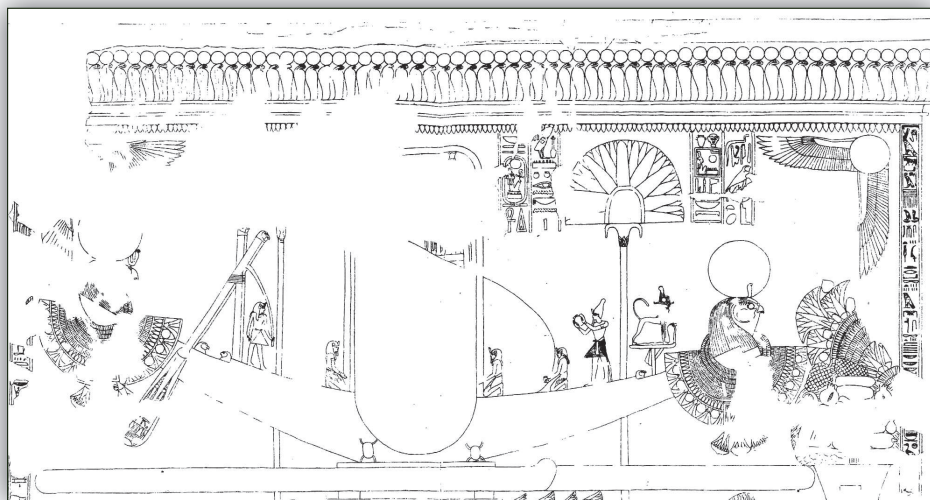


Figure 7. Line drawing of a relief scene in the Abydos temple of Seti I, depicting the portable barque shrine of Horus with hawk-headed aegi at prow and stern (from Calverley and Broome 1933, pl. 27).



Figure 8. Group of faience funerary figurines of workers (*shabtis*) recovered from the tomb context, inscribed with the name and title of the tomb owner.

name of the tomb owner (fig. 8), perhaps to be read as the priest of the (house of) bread, *Shed-Aset*. Five overseer figures that formed part of this set of *shabtis* were also found, distinguished from the workers by their kilts and whips. Two later *shabtis* found in the tomb indicate a phase of reuse in the Late Period.

During Ptolemaic times, the site became a repository for mummified animals. The skeletal remains of at least eighty-eight individual dogs were found in the central long chamber of the structure, along with several felines and caprids and a large quantity of linen. The skeletal remains were highly disarticulated, and their disturbed condition likely reflects the shredding of a large group of animal mummies when they were removed from their original context, perhaps in another reused tomb. Most of the skeletal material does not preserve traces of resin or elaborate linen wrappings. Numerous dog burials as well as ibises and more rarely jackals and hawks have also been noted in the ongoing excavations of the nearby Shunet ez-Zebib (Adams 2012, 29), an Early Dynastic enclosure shown on the general site plan, although the majority of these were interred in ceramic vessels or were simple inhumations, and no mention is made of linen fabric in association with them. Given the strong association of the processional route with the protective deity Wepwawet (Leahy 1989), who took the form of a jackal, the prominence of canid remains in the Votive Zone context may reflect votive behavior specific to this part of the North Abydos landscape.

Perhaps the most important artifact found during the 2011 season is a wooden statue of a king (figs. 9 and 10), which was recovered from mixed debris in the central area of the northernmost longitudinal chamber of the monumental structure. The disturbed context of the artifact makes it unclear whether it originally derived from the small temple of Thutmose III a short distance away or from the same deposit of material that

Figure 9 (right). Frontal view of the wooden statue of a king wearing the *nemes* headdress and triangular kilt. The king is depicted striding forward in a pose similar to examples known from the tombs of Amenhotep II, Thutmose III, and Tutankhamun.

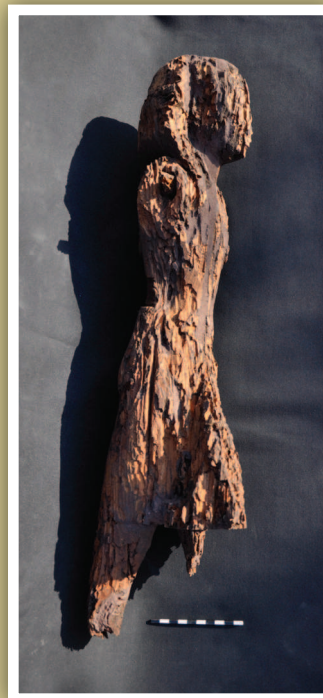


Figure 10 (left). Side view of the wooden statue after conservation. The proportions of the figure are consistent with an Eighteenth Dynasty date (ca. 1450 B.C.E.), but the small waist may suggest that the ruler represented is Hatshepsut, a female pharaoh who ruled during that period.

contained the wooden aegis. Fragments of painted relief from the limestone walls of the Thutmose III temple were also found in the locus of fill around the statue. The figure was carved from a single piece of nonlocal, coniferous wood, with the exception of the left leg and arms, now missing, which were originally separate pieces attached to the core with mortise and tenon joints. The statue was found in very poor condition, encrusted with mud and frass from insect infestation that had left innumerable holes that seriously compromised the integrity of the object. Mahmoud Hassan Mohamed, a trained conservator with expertise in wood, undertook the cleaning, consolidation, and restoration of this important artifact prior to its transportation to the SCA magazines in Sohaj.

The statue represents a king wearing a *nemes* headdress and short kilt with triangular apron, striding with left leg forward. The carving of the face is very fine, and the chin and jaw line are tapered. As is the case with other known wooden royal statues, no traces of a royal name are preserved. The only means of dating the statue, therefore, is by comparison of its proportions with those of other royal images of known date. Although further study is necessary to confirm any conclusions, the statue

exhibits strong similarities to the wooden statue of Thutmose III found in his tomb, KV 34 (CCG 24901, Daressy 1902, pl. LV), and that from KV 35, thought to depict Amenhotep II (CCG 24598, Daressy 1902, pl. XXXI). The correspondence of proportions of the Abydos statue with these known examples strongly suggests a date in the Eighteenth Dynasty prior to the Amarna period. However, the waist of the Abydos statue is proportionally significantly thinner than those of the Thutmose III and Amenhotep II figures. It is possible that this feature points to the female ruler Hatshepsut as the king portrayed in the Abydos wooden statue, since representations of her often feature a narrow waist and delicate modeling of the chin as a way of alluding to her feminine physiognomy. If in fact the Votive Zone statue represents Hatshepsut, it would provide important new insight into her building activity at Abydos, as well as indications of her expansion of processional rituals at sites other than Thebes.

Significance of Research Results

Recent fieldwork has highlighted the importance of the Votive Zone as an enduring locus of votive behavior for individuals from many different socioeconomic levels and confirmed that, despite the complexity of the archaeological deposits and the long history of disturbance, systematic excavation at the site can produce a great deal of meaningful evidence. Alongside the textual data that has long been the focus of Egyptologists, contextual archaeological data from the site provides crucial insights into social organization, individual agency, landscape and the built environment, urbanism, and interregional interaction. Most significantly, ongoing excavations have produced rare physical evidence associated with ritual processions and have revealed unexpected complexity in the utilization of older structures and objects to express and enhance relative status, power, and legitimacy in this ancient complex society.

Note

1. The Toronto Abydos Votive Zone project was carried out in June–July 2011, under the auspices of the University of Pennsylvania–Yale–Institute of Fine Arts, New York University Expedition to Abydos. Funding for the project was provided by the Wenner-Gren Foundation. The project staff included the present author (Director, Surveyor, Photographer), Mr. Ayman Mohamed Damarany and Mr. Barakat 'Eid Ahmed (SCA Inspectors), Mr. Mahmoud Hassan Mohamed (Conservator), Ms. Tamara Bower (Archaeological Illustrator), Dr. Christina Geisen (Epigrapher), and University of Toronto doctoral students: Ms. Amber Hutchinson (Archaeological Site Supervisor), Ms. Meredith Brand (Ceramicist), and Ms. Janet Khuu (Archaeological Site Supervisor and Osteologist).

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Mary-Ann Pouls Wegner received her Ph.D. in Egyptology from the University of Pennsylvania and has been teaching at the University of Toronto in the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations since 2000. She is currently Associate Professor of Egyptian Archaeology, as well as the Director of the North Abydos Votive Zone Project, under the auspices of the University of Pennsylvania–Yale University–Institute of Fine Arts, New York University Expedition to Abydos.

