

## From the Sands of Time to the Worldwide Web, Digital Projects at Abydos



Removing sand along the ancient mudbrick walls of the royal cultic enclosure  
of king Khasekhemwy, the Shunet el-Zebib, February 2012.

Photograph by Greg Maka for the IFA expedition

**Abstract:** Abydos is one of the oldest and most important archaeological sites in Egypt. The earliest kings of Ancient Egypt (of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Dynasties) were buried here, and the remains of their sumptuous funerary monuments have been the focus of the Institute of Fine Arts Excavations since the late 1960s. Since then, and especially with the transition to digital photography, the project archives have grown exponentially. More recently, efforts have been made to open up a range of the visual material from the collection to the larger community of scholars, students and museum professionals, with the belief that current concerns in archaeology can best be addressed across institutional and disciplinary lines. The present paper reflects on the influence of digital technologies, and the platforms they offer for the distribution of visual documentation of the type encountered in the Abydos collection. One key question is whether the gradual transition to primarily digital archives is indeed stimulating fundamental changes within disciplines previously isolated within their practice.

# 1.

Roughly 250 miles south of Cairo and 56 miles northwest of Luxor, the archeological site of ancient Abydos extends over a surface of circa 5 square miles of desert terrain, bounded by the ever-changing contours of the Nile River valley. Inhabited since pre-dynastic times, it has shown remarkable historical continuity: many of the earliest kings of Ancient Egypt, of the First and Second Dynasties (circa 3050-2650 B.C.E.) were buried here; from the Middle Kingdom onwards, around 2000 B.C.E., it became the main cult center for the god Osiris whose emblematic tomb was presumed to be located here.<sup>1</sup> Due to the presence of these sacred burials Abydos remained a key site for cult activity and related pilgrimage into the Late Period, with instances of use documented until the fifth century C.E. Pharaohs dedicated temples, the elites built cult chapels, extensive cemetery grounds developed in proximity to the Old Kingdom royal tombs and monuments, while towns and villages grew in conjunction with the resulting ritual activity.

The Early Dynastic royal tombs are located in an area known today as Umm el Qa'ab, at the mouth of an imposing Wadi that leads visitors into the labyrinthine geography of ancient riverbeds, valleys and plateaus. Within the larger ideological constellations of Ancient Egyptian society, scholars now believe that the entire area around Umm el Qa'ab had symbolic significance: read through mythology, the topographic features of the Wadi replicated the path to the afterlife. Coupled with each of these early royal tombs, a series of funerary monuments or *funerary cult enclosures* were built in the vicinity of the ancient town site.

Following a long pause from the late thirties until the late sixties, international institutions resumed excavations in Abydos, working collaboratively with their Egyptian counterparts and the Supreme Council of Antiquities. This new phase of excavations was initiated by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Peabody Museum of Yale University in 1967, and was co-directed by David O'Connor, then of Penn and William Kelly Simpson of

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive history of Abydos see David O'Connor, *Abydos, Egypt's First Pharaohs and the Cult of Osiris* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009)

Yale. The current Institute of Fine Arts excavations represent the continuation of that work, and are led by O'Connor and Expedition Associate Director / Field Director Matthew Adams; a priority since 2000 has been the excavation and preservation of the royal mortuary enclosure of king Khasekhemwy (ca. 2650 BCE), also known as the Shunet el-Zebib, which is the single surviving monument of its kind in Egypt. This work is part of a broader program for the investigation of the remains of all early royal enclosures located in the Northern area of the site.



Conservator Raina Chao consolidating artifacts excavated during the 2010 field season.  
Photograph by Greg Maka for the IFA expedition

## 2.

In the history of modern Egyptology, beginning with Napoleon's Egyptian military campaign and the accompanying scientific expeditions (1798 – 1801), and increasingly with the gradual professionalization of the discipline, the interpretation of historic material was tied to available technologies for documentation, which determined the amount of content that could be recorded, transcribed, stored, and moved for the purposes of research and collection.<sup>2</sup>

The excavation history of Abydos goes back to the 1860s, with the first expeditions led by French archeologist Auguste Mariette (1858 – 1861). Enthused by a series of important discoveries numerous archeologists were successively drawn to the site, and while some churned the sand in search of precious artifacts, others sought knowledge, and endeavored to unlock the buried “secrets” of the ancient civilization. The earliest photographic record of excavations in Abydos dates to the expeditions of British archeologists Flinders Petrie (1899 to 1903 and 1921 to 1922) and John Garstang (1906 to 1909, Abydos Excavations Committee, Liverpool Institute of Archeology, 813 glass negatives). Both were amongst the first archeologists in Egypt to use the innovative technology to record their findings.<sup>3</sup>

Similar to the types of scientific photography commonly found in the archeological archives of the period, the majority of the surviving plates show excavated architectural ruins and the associated fragile artifacts and human remains. In addition, the Petrie and Garstang archives contain a number of photographs documenting the excavation process. Aside from providing

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<sup>2</sup> In the official report which announced Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's invention to the French Chamber of Deputies, deputy François Jean Dominique Arago would state: “everyone will imagine the extraordinary advantages which could have been derived from so exact and rapid a means of reproduction [photography] during the expedition to Egypt;” (Arago, Report of the Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, 1939)

<sup>3</sup> The invention and proliferation of photography in the mid-nineteenth century coincided with increased commercial interest to explore Egypt's sacred landscapes. Still marked by the romantic patina of their age, photographs by Frenchmen Maxime Du Camp and Gustave Le Gray, or by British photographer Francis Firth, also provide insight into the condition of these important ancient Egyptian monuments during the mid-nineteenth century. A recent source on the history of photography in Egypt is Maria Golia, *Photography and Egypt* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010).

Egyptologists and anthropologists off-site with valuable study material, these rare photographs constitute primary documents of work, contemporary archeological work – in a context where at least at that point in time, Egypt’s greatest appeal, for foreign tourists and scholars alike, lay in its past.

### 3.

With the transition to digital photography in the year 2000, the Institute of Fine Arts Abydos Excavations archives have grown exponentially.<sup>4</sup> A cross-section through this extensive photographic record, now accessible through an online database, will reveal not just the complexity of the ancient site, but also that of the lesser-discussed history of its excavation and preservation, framed by sizeable transformations affecting the natural and built environment around. After millennia of habitation and use, significant sections of this heritage site have survived in good condition. Nonetheless, preservation efforts remain priorities for all current excavation projects at Abydos. In recent years, satellite photography has shown substantial alterations in the landscape, changes which will increasingly affect archeological work and most importantly the surviving material remains; urban expansion and the incursion of farms onto partially archeological terrain for instance have become urgent concerns.

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<sup>4</sup> In parallel to cataloguing photographs from current excavations, we are digitizing slides from the analog photography collection, going back to the sixties.



General view of Aydos from the high desert plateau, towards the Nile valley, 2009.  
Photograph by Greg Maka for the IFA expedition

Post-colonial critiques coupled with major political and social transformations in the region have provoked important methodological shifts in the adjacent fields of Egyptology, archeology and anthropology; and with more attention to context, ancient and modern alike, more responsibilities arise. As a consequence, archeologists worldwide have sought to add more transparency to their working process. By gradually introducing non-academic audiences to the type of work conducted on archeological sites, such projects have successfully initiated educational programs that have increased local awareness to the significance of the heritage at hand and to the necessity of its rescue and preservation.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of the IFA Abydos photographic archives, efforts have been made to open a range of the visual material from the collection to a larger community of scholars, students and museum professionals, with the belief that current concerns in archaeology can best be addressed across institutional and disciplinary lines.

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<sup>5</sup> A compelling model has been implemented by the Çatalhöyük Research Project, under the direction of Stanford University Prof. Ian Hodder: <http://www.catalhoyuk.com/>



Since the 1960s and even more so with the switch to digital media, in addition to the scientific documentation there has been an increase in the type of context rich photography that is almost entirely missing from the historic record, with the rare exception of photography enthusiasts such as Petrie or Garstang.<sup>6</sup> One of the particularities, and strengths of the IFA project is the thoroughness with which this context has been recorded: archeological work, the life of successive teams of researchers and workers, conditions on site and at the field house, local communities, the landscape, etc. These photographs offer a unique perspective on Egypt, on current practices in archeology, and allow us to fill a historic gap within the discipline.



1. Field conservator Lucy-Anne Skinner, Mellon Teaching Resident, Buffalo State Art Conservation Department, and Salima Ikram, Professor of Egyptology, American University in Cairo, examining a burial during the 2013 field season. Photograph by Greg Maka for the IFA expedition
2. Illustrator Mária Iván at the drawing board during the 2013 field season. Photograph by Greg Maka for the IFA expedition
3. Egyptologist Magdalena Włodarska, University of Warsaw, excavating the southern corridor of the king Khasekhemwy enclosure during the 2010 field season. Original niching and plaster finish exposed. Photograph by Amanda Kirkpatrick for the IFA expedition

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<sup>6</sup> Even with these rare examples, the attention to context and work process is minimal.

In 2011 we began editing a seasonal excavations blog, guided by the conviction that “by showing archaeology in practice one can expand upon its academic definition, that with a slight move of the camera one can shift attention to the producing rather than receiving end.”<sup>7</sup> We also organized an exhibition, which was on view at the Institute of Fine Arts during the fall semester in 2010 and then at NYU’s Kimmel Galleries from January to May 2011. *Field Season: Records, Wandering Perspectives, Side Notes*, focused on instances of “archeological life” at Abydos, and presented a selection of work by field photographers Greg Maka (2009-2013), Amanda Kirkpatrick (2010) and Gus Gusciora (2011-2013).<sup>8</sup> The Abydos blog remains an active work in progress, to be supplemented during future field seasons with an array of multimedia material: from slide shows and video, to written accounts and interviews with researchers, conservators, students and other team members.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Adams and Ileana Selejan, “About,” *IFA Excavations at Abydos Egypt Blog*.  
<http://www.abydos.org/blog/about/>

<sup>8</sup> See *Field Season: Records, Wandering Perspectives, Side Notes*.  
<http://www.fieldseason.tumblr.com>

<sup>9</sup> For video and multimedia content see Greg Maka, “Slideshow,”  
<http://www.abydos.org/blog/2012/returning-to-abydos/> (Last modified February 21, 2012); Gus Gusciora, Greg Maka and Ileana Selejan, “Introducing: Matthew Adams, field director,” *IFA Excavations at Abydos Egypt Blog*.  
[http://www.abydos.org/blog/2011/introducing-matthew-adams\\_version-2/](http://www.abydos.org/blog/2011/introducing-matthew-adams_version-2/) (last modified July 8, 2011)





*Rear view of Corinna Lindon Smith and Joseph Lindon Smith riding donkeys through the desert. Their traveling party walks on foot beside them (c. 1938-39). Corinna Lindon Smith Papers, The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University*  
<http://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/schlesinger-library>

As material from previous excavation seasons as well as from other expeditions is gradually digitized, important historic comparisons can be drawn within and between all of these archives. In digital “space” other associated archives could more easily be linked to the material that continues to be generated on site in Abydos. The image above for instance, found in the archives of the Lindon Smith family – avid travelers and amateur Egyptologists – at Harvard University, presents yet again an example of the type of extremely rare context rich visual material from an era of archeology that remains mostly documented through text. Taken circa 1938-39, it shows the American travelers and their Egyptian guides entering the Wadi Umm el Qa’ab.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The photograph might have been taken by Egyptologist George Reisner, who accompanied the couple on the trip.

Site preservation efforts are becoming now – due to pollution, climate change, overpopulation, etc. more urgent than ever before. By thoughtfully and sensibly engaging the scholarship and experience generated by long-term archeological projects such as the Institute of Fine Arts Excavations in Abydos, we can slowly begin to make a significant contribution to the education of the broader public both in Egypt and internationally, and to the sustainable preservation of world heritage.



Excavations at the royal cultic enclosure of king Khasekhemwy, the Shunet el-Zebib, during the 2013 field season. Photograph by Greg Maka for the IFA expedition