

Seeking the Ramesside Royal Harem: New Fieldwork at Medinet el-Gurob

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Introduction

This article is intended both to discuss the question of what constituted a royal harem in ancient Egypt, and to present the results of ongoing University of Liverpool archaeological survey at Medinet el-Gurob,¹ the only currently known site in Egypt where both archaeology and texts seem to indicate that such an institution existed for much of the New Kingdom (from the reign of Thutmose III until at least the time of Ramesses V, c.1480–1150 BC).

Several different words were used by the ancient Egyptians to describe places and phenomena that we might consider to be some kind of ‘harem’ (an Arabic word literally meaning ‘forbidden’ or ‘inviolable’). The term *ḫpt nswt* is frequently translated as ‘royal private quarters’ or ‘royal apartment/granary’, while the word *kꜣp* seems to have been used to refer to a kind of school or nursery within palaces where it is presumed some of the wives and their children were housed.²

The term *ḫnr* (deriving from a verb meaning ‘to restrain, confine’) is often translated as ‘harem’ (referring both to the place and to its inhabitants),³ and the related term *pr ḫnty* was used since at least the Old Kingdom to describe an administrative institution connected with royal women and probably attached to pharaonic palaces and villas during the New Kingdom.⁴ However, the translation of this term as ‘harem’ can be confusing both because it was almost certainly not precisely the same as the Ottoman harem (which tends to be the example best-known to western scholars) and because the texts and archaeological remains are comparatively difficult to reconcile.⁵ On the one hand, the surviving texts describe an important economic institution sup-

¹ The 2005–10 teams at Gurob consisted of: I. Shaw, A. Kamal, C. Malleson, J. Picton, I. Pridden, H. Pethen, L. Bertini, G. Xekalaki, S. Cooke, R. Billington, M. Yoyotte, T. Herbich, D. Swiech, A. el-Senussi, N. Mahmoud, T. Jakielski, C. Werschkun, V. Perunka, D. Boatright, A. Hodgkinson, E. Hughes, K. Strutt, O. Faroukh, A. Garnett, F. Hagen, and J. Bunbury, and our SCA inspectors: M. I. Mohammed (2005), I. M. Talaat (2006), A. S. Hashem (2007), G. M. Amin (2008), S. M. Abdel Samed (2009), and N. M. Ahmed (2010). We are grateful to the SCA, particularly Dr el-Aidy (2005), Dr Ahmed Abd-el Aal (2006–10) and Dr Zahi Hawass, and to the British Academy, the Wainwright Trust, and the University of Liverpool for providing funding for the project.

² S. Quirke, *The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom* (New Malden, 1990), 87–101; see also D. Nord, Review of E. Reiser, *Der königliche Harim im alten Ägypten und seine Verwaltung* (Vienna, 1972), *JNES* 34 (1975), 142–5; B. Mathieu, ‘L’énigme du recrutement des enfants du kap’: une solution?’, *GM* 177 (2000), 41–9.

³ E. Reiser, *Der königliche Harim im alten Ägypten und seine Verwaltung* (Vienna, 1972).

⁴ I am very grateful to Marine Yoyotte for allowing me to consult her mémoire de maîtrise, in which she presents a detailed review of the terminological evidence on Egyptian harems: M. Yoyotte-Husson, ‘L’institution du harem et le site de Gourob au nouvel empire’, Université Paris-IV, Sorbonne, Paris, 2003 (unpublished dissertation).

⁵ See D. Lorton, Review of E. Reiser, *Der königliche Harim im alten Ägypten und seine Verwaltung* (Vienna, 1972), *JARCE* 11

ported from taxation, and receiving regular supplies of rations, and on the other hand the archaeological remains at some royal settlements suggest the domestic apartments of the king and his royal women.

These royal harems would almost certainly have included not only Egyptian women and their children, but also large numbers of foreigners married by the Egyptian king primarily in order to establish diplomatic links with the Hittite and Mitannian royal courts. In Year 34 the Egyptian bonds with the Hittites were strengthened by a marriage between Ramesses and a daughter of Hattusili, who was given the Egyptian name Neferura-who-beholds-Horus. This event was recorded not only on the ‘marriage stele’ in Ramesses’ temple at Abu Simbel but also on Papyrus UCL 32795 from the likely harem palace at Gurob, which refers to ‘...the king’s wife Maathorneferura (may she live) (the daughter) of the ruler of Khatti’.

Peter Lacovara⁶ has attempted to create a set of criteria that could be used to determine whether a particular building or a group of structures could be interpreted as a royal harem. He argues that there may have been a standardised plan for New Kingdom harem palaces (with a possible Middle Kingdom precedent at Tell el-Dab’a).⁷ He suggests, on the basis of likely examples at the cities of Malkata, Amarna and Gurob, that each harem palace probably consisted of a pair of adjacent buildings (each divided into two by partition walls), one larger than the other, and that one of the buildings was probably the residential quarter (therefore characterized more by columned rooms) while the other was divided up into small rooms probably used for storage and food production.

Is Gurob the site of a royal harem of the Eighteenth–Twentieth Dynasties?

One crucial way to try to understand the nature of an Egyptian harem of the New Kingdom, as well as the whole community and socio-economic infrastructure that developed around such an institution, is to study a place that has yielded both archaeological and textual evidence for a harem. Gurob (or Medinet el-Gurob: ‘City of the Crows’) represents precisely such an opportunity—it is a New Kingdom settlement and cemetery site at the south-eastern end of the Faiyum region that was occupied from at least the early Eighteenth Dynasty until the late Ramesside period. Many aspects of the inscriptions, papyri and archaeological remains suggest that the principal *raison d’être* of this settlement was to maintain an important royal harem.

Gurob has been identified with the town of Mer-wer (‘great channel/canal’), which was established by Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC) and appears to have flourished during the reign of Amenhotep III (1391–1353 BC). During the Ramesside period, the presence of house remains above the palace enclosures suggests that the Thutmose harem palace phase was succeeded by a later phase of settlement during which the community may have been of a somewhat different character. The site was first excavated by Petrie, but by his standards the work was rather unsatisfactory. During the first season (1888–9) he was simultaneously working at the sites of Hawara and Kahun, and therefore evidently devoting only a limited amount of attention to Gurob.⁸ During the second season the work was supervised not by Petrie but by the inexperienced volunteer Hughes-Hughes, therefore the excavation strategy and subsequent publication are still relatively unclear, omitting any published plan of the town itself.⁹ In these two seasons, Petrie and

(1974), 98–101, and B. J. Kemp, Review of E. Reiser, *Der königliche Harim im alten Ägypten und seine Verwaltung* (Vienna, 1972), *JEA* 62 (1976), 191–2.

⁶ P. Lacovara, *The New Kingdom Royal City* (London, 1997), 36–8; see also P. Lacovara, ‘Gurob and the New Kingdom “Harim” Palace’, in J. Phillips (ed.) *Ancient Egypt, the Aegean and the Near East: Studies in Honour of Martha Rhoads Bell* (San Antonio, 1997), 297–306.

⁷ Lacovara, *Royal City*, 38; M. Bietak, ‘Tell el-Dab’a’, *AO* 32 (1985), 132–3.

⁸ W. M. F. Petrie, *Kahun, Gurob and Hawara* (London, 1890); see also A. P. Thomas, *Gurob: a New Kingdom town*, 2 vols (*Egyptology Today* 5/1; Warminster, 1981).

⁹ W. M. F. Petrie, *Illahun, Kahun and Gurob* (London, 1891).

his assistants excavated part of the New Kingdom town, including a large building that he identified as a temple, and cemeteries dating to the New Kingdom and the Ptolemaic period. The subsequent work of Currelly and Loat¹⁰ and of Brunton and Engelbach¹¹ concentrated primarily on the temple and cemeteries, although Loat briefly mentions the remains of a small Eighteenth Dynasty village that may have constituted an early New Kingdom settlement¹² (perhaps like that beside the South Palace at Deir el-Ballas).

In 1905 the town was investigated briefly by the German archaeologist Ludwig Borchardt, who suggested that the main enclosure-wall, contained not a temple—as Petrie had suggested—but a late Eighteenth Dynasty palace and harem as well as the town itself.¹³ In 1978 Barry Kemp¹⁴ synthesized the results of the various excavations to construct an impression of the New Kingdom harem-town which might have superseded the earlier village, but was itself eventually transformed into a small Ramesside town (see fig.1). A stratigraphic section drawing was made by Peter Lacovara¹⁵ in the southern part of the site (on a one-day visit in 1984, shortly after the site had ceased to be a military area). Lacovara argued that this appeared to confirm that there were two distinct phases of settlement at Gurob: early/mid-Eighteenth Dynasty and Ramesside.

The archaeological remains at Gurob can be clearly identified as the remains of an independent establishment relating to royal women (a ‘harem-palace’), founded in the reign of Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC) and occupied throughout the rest of the Eighteenth Dynasty and presumably also for at least part of the Ramesside period. The inscriptions on stelae, papyri and various other inscribed artefacts from the main buildings at the site repeatedly include the titles of officials connected with the royal harem of Merwer. There was evidently a similar establishment at Memphis, but that site has not survived.¹⁶

Although other ‘harems’ have in the past been identified among the remains at such sites as Malkata and Amarna, which incorporated the palaces of Amenophis III (1391–1353 BC) and Akhenaten (1351–1335 BC) respectively, they are unlikely to have had any connection with the harem described in the texts and may often in fact derive more from the imaginations of the excavators than from any hard evidence (although the so-called North Palace at el-Amarna, which ironically was not specifically identified as a harem by its excavators, bears some comparison with the buildings at Gurob).¹⁷ As far as the textual version of the institution is concerned, the women are said to have undertaken such tasks as the weaving of linen (an activity that is well-attested both archaeologically and textually at Gurob). Papyrus UCL 32795 from Gurob includes references to textiles: ‘royal linen, *idg*-garment (headcloth), royal linen, *mss*-garment (bag-tunic), royal linen, *sdiw*-cloth (triangular cloth) of first quality’.¹⁸

The Gurob harem was administered by such male officials as tax-collectors and scribes, whose titles have been preserved on numerous surviving documents.¹⁹ Three stelae from the mud-brick temple of

¹⁰ W. L. S. Loat, *Gurob* (BSAE/ERA 10; London, 1905) [published as part-volume with M. Murray, *Saqqara Mastabas I*].

¹¹ G. Brunton and R. Engelbach, *Gurob* (BSAE 9; London, 1927)

¹² Loat, *Gurob*, 1.

¹³ L. Borchardt, *Der Porträtkopf der Königin Teje im Besitz von Dr. James Simon in Berlin* (Leipzig, 1911); see also D. Wildung, *Der Porträtkopf der Königin Teje* (Berlin, 2001).

¹⁴ B. J. Kemp, ‘The harim-palace at Medinet el-Ghurab’, *ZÄS* 105 (1978), 122–33.

¹⁵ Lacovara, in Phillips (ed.), *Studies ... Bell*, 297, 301, fig. 3.

¹⁶ Reiser, *Der königliche Harim*, 28–31.

¹⁷ Preliminary reports on the North Palace include F. G. Newton, ‘Excavations at el-Amarnah, 1923–24’, *JEA* 10 (1924), 289–98; T. Whittemore, ‘The excavations at el-Amarnah, season 1924–25’, *JEA* 12 (1926), 3–12; H. Frankfort, ‘Preliminary report on the excavations at Tell el-Amarnah, 1926–1927’, *JEA* 13, 209–18, but see also K. Spence, ‘The North Palace at Amarna’, *EA* 15 (1999), 14–16.

¹⁸ A. H. Gardiner, *Ramesside Administrative Documents* (Oxford, 1948), 22–4.

¹⁹ See Kemp, *ZÄS* 105, 131 for full bibliography on these documents.

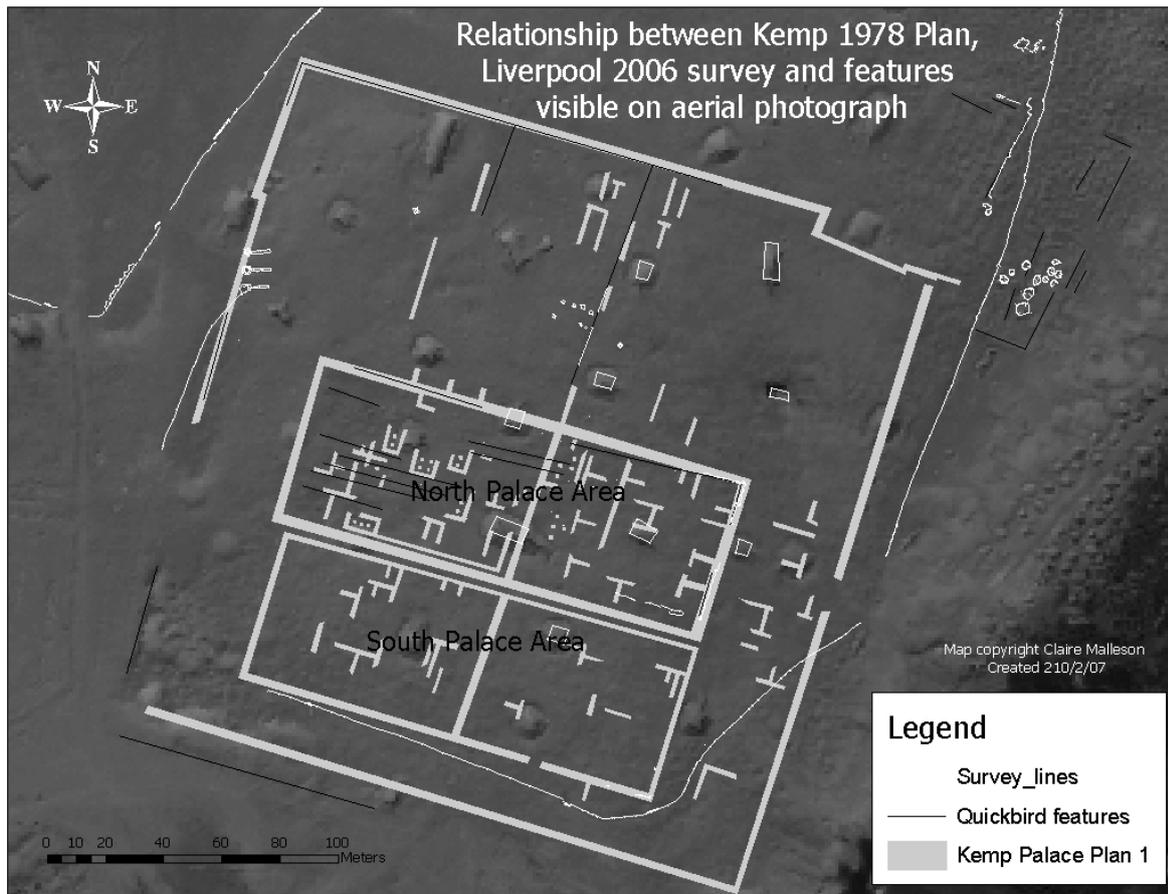


FIG. 1. Plan of Gurob showing the synthesis of Petrie's and Borchardt's plans of the town-site superimposed over the satellite image (synthesis of plans after Kemp 1978, fig. 3; GIS by Claire Malleon).

Thutmose III at Gurob, for example, bear the names of the following harem officials: Usermaatra-em-heb 'deputy of the harem of Mer-wer', Iy 'overseer of the royal harem', and Djarwy 'servant of the harem'. An object from the palace at Gurob itself is inscribed with the name of Sety 'royal scribe, overseer of the women of the harem of Mer-wer'. Three officials are named on objects from the New Kingdom cemeteries at Gurob: Inturas 'deputy of the harem in She', Suner 'scribe of the royal harem', and Nefermennu 'controller of the harem in She', and a further three harem bureaucrats are named on papyri from Gurob (Mahu, Sety and Hed-nekhtu).

Many of the finds from Petrie's two seasons of excavation in the main town—now in the Petrie Collection, University College, London—were catalogued in the 1970s as part of a reassessment of the site as a whole.²⁰ Although only about forty of Petrie's finds at University College are definitely known to have come from the town rather than the cemeteries (and none have any detailed provenances within the town), the collection at least provides us with the raw data for a basic picture of daily life at Gurob.

The amount of faience jewellery in circulation at Gurob seems to have been comparable with the situation at Amarna; Petrie mentions in his unpublished Journal (9–16 March, 1889) that 'there is a large amount of beads to be picked up in the surface dust of the town'. There are many beads, rings, amulets and other jewellery in the Petrie Collection, none of which have detailed provenances, although Thomas suggests that most of the fingerings probably came from the town.²¹ The proportions of types within the

²⁰ Thomas, *Gurob*.

²¹ Thomas, *Gurob*, 13.

Petrie collection cannot be regarded as anything but vague approximations of the original record, but it should be noted that jewellery represents at least 40% of the items in the catalogue of the collection. The houses at Gurob seem to have been furnished with wooden chairs, stools and head-rests, judging from the preserved fragments. There is no evidence, among the excavation records and surviving artefacts, of such fittings as painted plaster, columns, lintels or jambs in the houses, but it would be surprising if the houses' interiors were not decorated in some way. As far as subsistence is concerned there is also little reference to the querns and grinders which are so common at Amarna houses, although Petrie refers to the occurrence, in some houses, of 'a sort of fire-box or stove of very rude pottery'.²² The evidence for food procurement, as opposed to its preparation, is more common: the Petrie collection includes fragments of two wooden sickle-handles, three sickle-flints and a possible fragment of a wooden plough, as well as many fish-hooks, 'net-sinkers' and netting needles.

It is possible, on this evidence, that the New Kingdom community at Gurob was more involved in agriculture than the inhabitants of Amarna, but in certain parts of Amarna (such as the western side of the North Suburb) the amount of evidence for fishing probably equalled that at Gurob.²³ The artefacts relating to craftwork practised at Gurob supply evidence that the range of occupations was just as diverse as at Amarna. A wide variety of carpenters' tools has survived, including copper alloy adze-blades, chisels, awls, borers, flint scrapers, rasps, and a bow-drill. There is also a small amount of evidence for stone working, in the form of chisels and borers. The Petrie collection includes no clay moulds or other evidence for faience production, but Brunton and Engelbach refer to the remains of a set of glass factories and kilns,²⁴ and Petrie mentions that a few moulds for beads, amulets and rings were found in private houses in the town.²⁵ This raises the possibility that the amount of private production and ownership of faience jewellery was much smaller than at Amarna.

The Petrie Museum collection does include an invaluable piece of evidence for metalworking at Gurob, in the form of a pottery crucible containing copper slag, which is said to be from the town itself,²⁶ and indeed the University of Liverpool surface survey has already yielded fragments of unworked copper (see below for discussion of the small finds from the 2005–6 seasons). Even without this evidence it would probably be necessary to hypothesize that some metalworking took place at Gurob, considering that finished bronze and copper objects account for over 13% of the Petrie Museum collection. This percentage seems extremely high compared with a proportion of *c.*5% in the whole Amarna artefactual sample (the highest percentage in any zone at Amarna being that of 9.9% in the North City).²⁷ However, as in the case of the jewellery, the quantities of different types of artefact in the Petrie Museum collection of Gurob material probably bear only a tenuous resemblance to those in the ancient community itself.

Future study of the site should therefore aim both to combine the material at University College London with that in other museums and to supplement these data with surface collection of pottery and other material, in order to try to gain a better understanding of the patterning of human activity at the site in all periods, but particularly during the long period of occupation of the New Kingdom town.

²² Petrie, *Kahun, Gurob and Hawara*, 33.

²³ For a detailed discussion of the patterning of artefacts and craftwork in the North Suburb at Amarna, see I. Shaw, 'The simulation of artifact diversity at el-Amarna, Egypt', *JEA* 22/2 (1995), 223–38.

²⁴ Brunton and Engelbach, *Gurob*, 3.

²⁵ Petrie, *Kahun, Gurob and Hawara*, 37.

²⁶ Thomas, *Gurob*, 10, 47.

²⁷ See I. Shaw, 'A Statistical Analysis of Artefacts at el-Amarna, Egypt', PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 1987, 181.

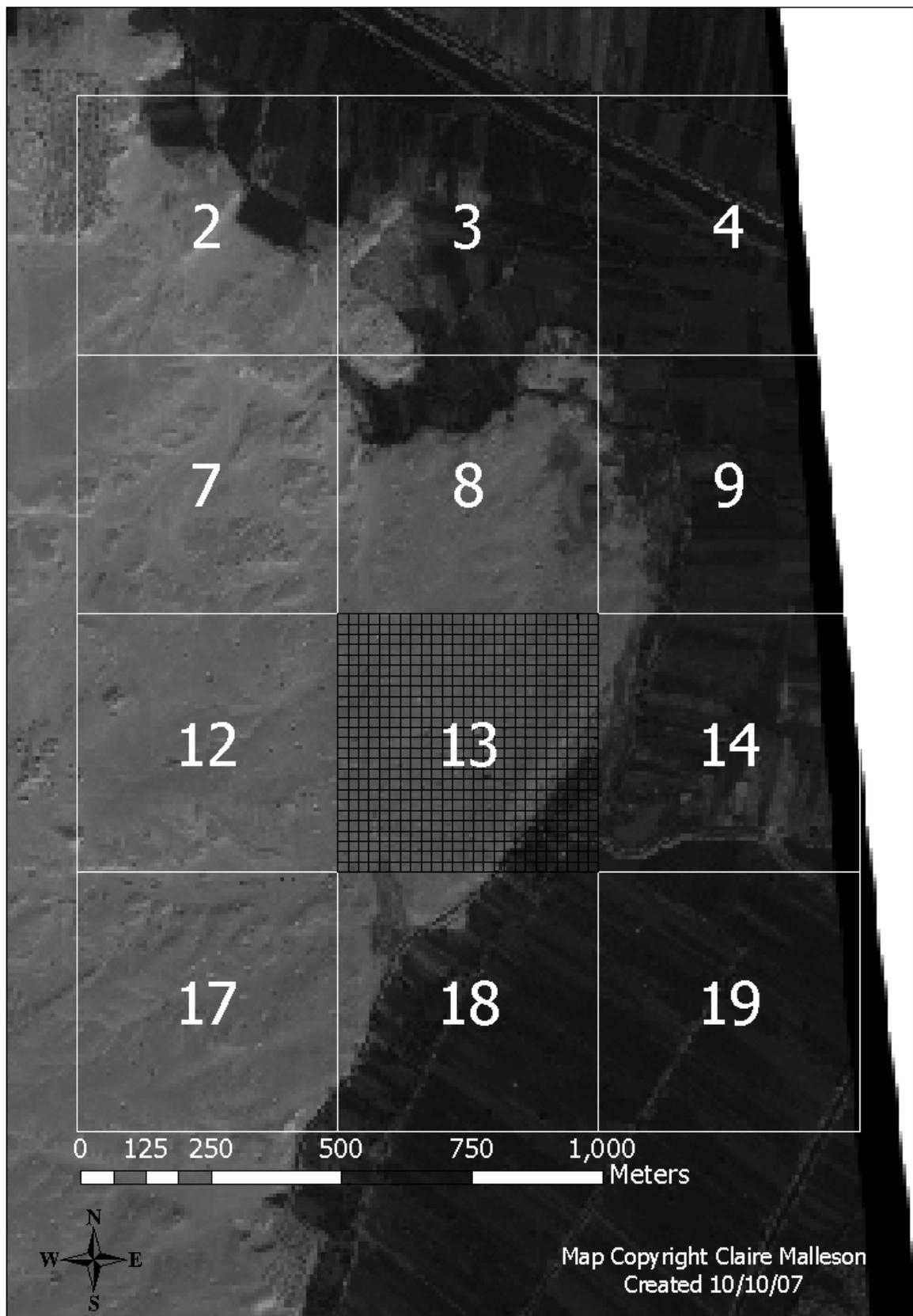


FIG. 2. The major grid of twelve survey squares superimposed onto the satellite image of Gurob (GIS by Claire Malleson).

The preliminary results of the University of Liverpool survey at Gurob (2005–6)

The University of Liverpool Gurob Harem Palace Project is a multi-disciplinary mission designed to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of New Kingdom towns and cities. Our principal aims, in the six seasons of fieldwork at Gurob since 2005, are to seek confirmation of the overall layout and chronology of the settlement area of the site.²⁸ In particular, the project is designed to analyse the relationships between the evolution of the highly specialized city of Gurob and its surrounding landscape in the changing conditions of the Faiyum region.

In 2010, we began fresh excavation (focusing on two different areas of the New Kingdom settlement at Gurob), but until then the strategy of the University of Liverpool project was geared towards the use of many other methods that allowed us to investigate both surface and sub-surface aspects of the site. This is the first opportunity in modern times to assess the current state of the site, after a long period of military use during the 1960s and 1970s.

Although there has been a tremendous growth in Egyptian settlement archaeology over the last thirty years, there is still a dearth of the kind of complex archaeological and environmental databases that can allow us to understand the reasons why Egyptian settlements adopt particular patterns and affect the surrounding landscape in specific ways. Our main goals in the Gurob project are therefore to use this site as a case-study of late Bronze Age urbanisation in the Nile valley, with particular emphasis on the hydrological context and the local resource base.

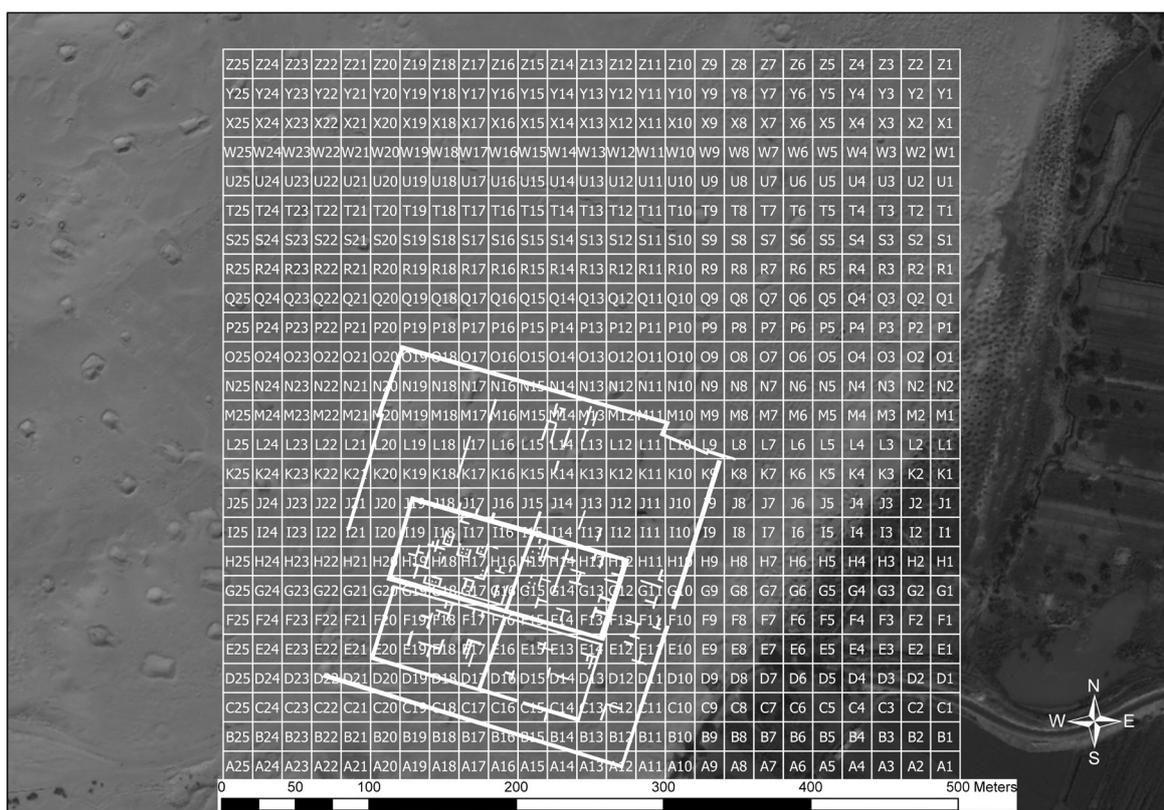


FIG. 3. Major gridsquare 13, with alphanumeric grid-points and the superimposed lines of Petrie's and Borchart's plans of the town-site (synthesis of plans after Kemp 1978, Fig.3; GIS by Claire Malleson).

²⁸ See I. Shaw, 'Gurob: an Egyptian harem?', *Current World Archaeology* 16 (2007), 2–9.

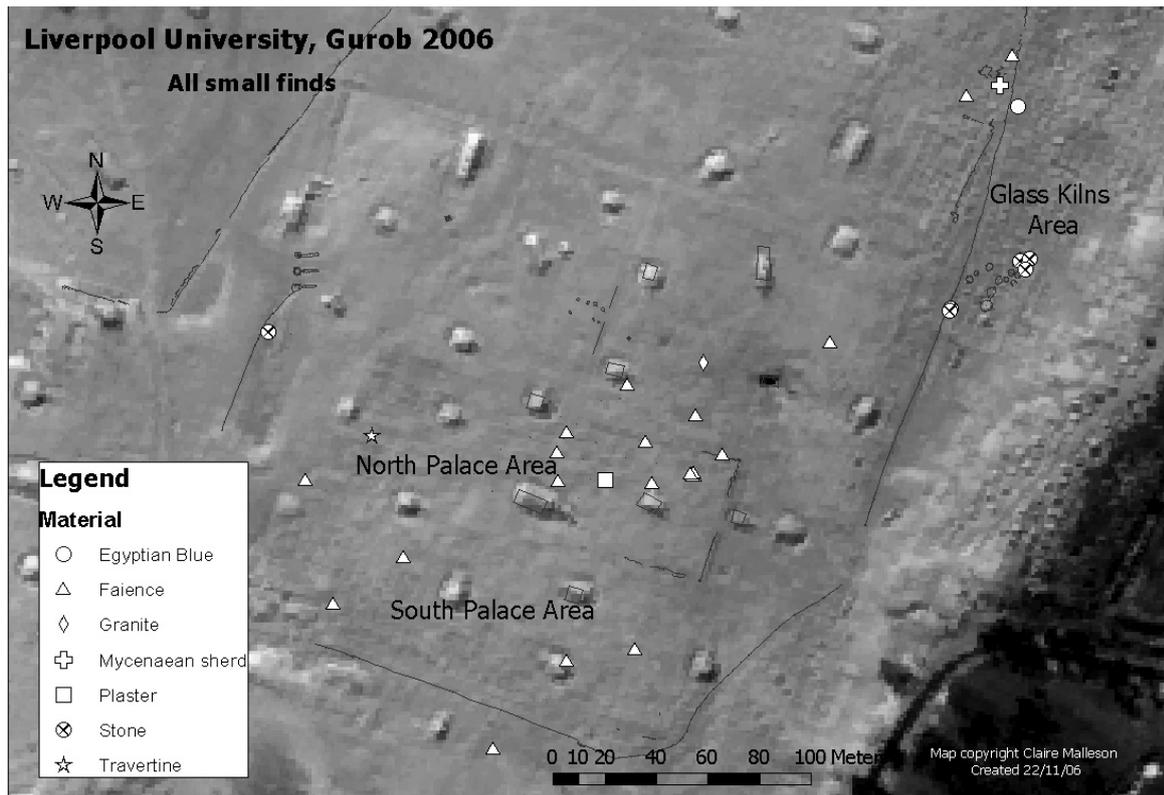


FIG. 4. Satellite image of Gurob showing the pattern of all small finds collected in 2005 and 2006 (GIS by Claire Malleson).



FIG. 5. A fragment of a black-painted blue faience vessel and a blue faience disc-bead, both collected in the 2005 surface survey and both dating to the New Kingdom (Photograph: I. Shaw).

The six seasons since 2005 have consisted of the following technical components:

- Topographical mapping of the site using a total station and hand-held GPS.
- Geophysical survey.
- Fieldwalking for surface collection of small finds.
- Pottery surface survey to examine the spatial patterning of activities at Gurob.
- Auger boring (from 2009 onwards) to gain a better understanding of the landscape.
- Excavation in selected areas.

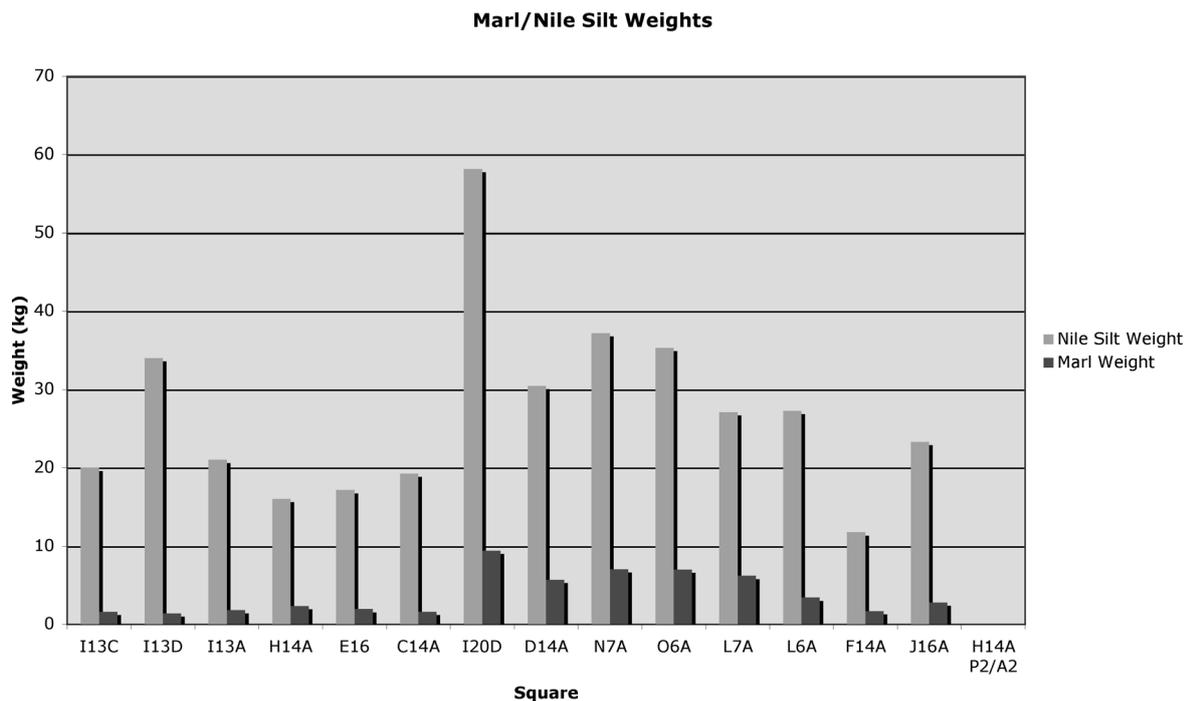


FIG. 7. Barchart showing the proportions (by weight) of marl and Nile silt fabric in specific gridsquares at Gurob town-site.

Nineteenth Dynasties), and consisting of a variety of types and fabrics (fig. 7), including amphorae, meat jars and storage jars. A few late Old Kingdom diagnostic sherds were found in squares I20d and L7a, suggesting that the surface survey may have some potential not only to reveal patterns of New Kingdom urban life at Gurob but also some of the patterning of the pre-New Kingdom cemeteries.

By the end of the 2006 season we had collected pottery from fourteen 10 × 10 m squares selected from within the grid of 20 × 20 m squares laid out as a preliminary to the topographic and magnetometry surveys. These squares were chosen systematically in order to try to obtain a number of samples from a diverse range of functional areas within the site, e.g. square I20d from the area occupied by the temple of Thutmose III in the southwestern sector of the town, square H14a from within the area of the northern palace building, and N7a from within the 'glassworking' area to the northeast of the main town and to the west of the so-called 'fort'. The rationale behind this strategy is to test the hypothesis that even after extensive excavations in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, together with subsequent severe disturbance during the late Twentieth-century military use of the site, it should still be possible to utilise the basic spatial patterning of different pottery types and fabrics to reconstruct certain aspects of human activities at the site during the pharaonic period.

The pottery from Gurob is potentially of great chronological significance for the Bronze Age of the east Mediterranean regions as a whole, since Tomb 605 in cemetery H at Gurob has been described as the best-dated context for Late Helladic pottery in Egypt.²⁹ The funerary equipment in Tomb 605 includes both a Ramesses II scarab and a complete LHIII B stirrup jar. A number of Mycenaean sherds have been found during the 2005–6 surface collection in the area of the town and palace buildings.

The magnetometry survey

In the 2006 and 2007 seasons Dr Tomasz Herbich undertook a magnetometry survey covering about five hectares. He focused on two principal zones: Area 1, comprising the two 'palace' buildings, and Area

²⁹ M. R. Bell, 'Gurob Tomb 605 and Mycenaean chronology', in P. Posener-Kriéger (ed.), *Mélanges Gamal Eddin Mokhtar* (Cairo, 1985), I, 61–86.



FIG. 8. Fragments of vitrified material from gridsquare L6a in the 'glassworking area' (Photograph: M. Yoyotte).

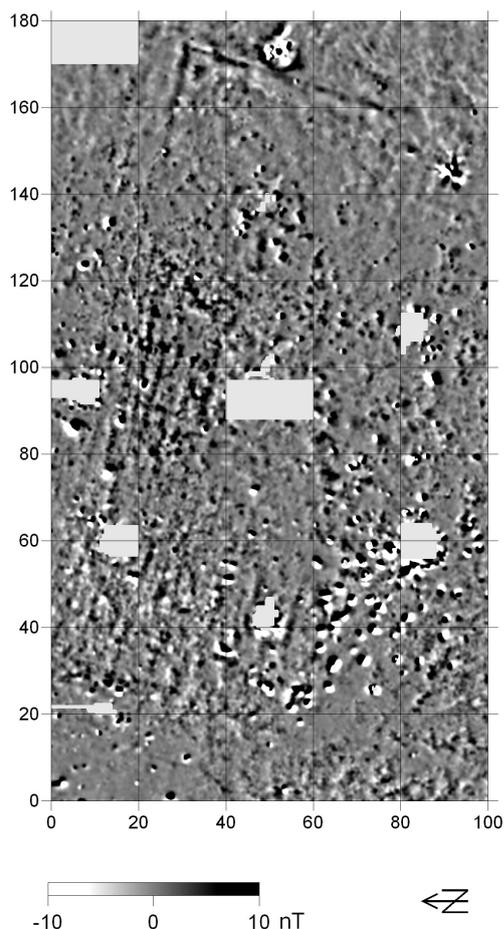


FIG. 9 (right). Magnetometry image of the northern palace building at Gurob, showing both external and internal walls (courtesy of Thomas Herbich).

2, to the north and northeast of the main town area, where Brunton and Engelbach had excavated a major building tentatively identified as a 'fortress' (possibly incorporating pre-New-Kingdom structures) and a 'glassworking' area, where large quantities of vitrified material are still clearly visible among the surface remains (fig. 8).

In the case of Area 1, it proved possible to discern many of the internal walls of the northern palace building that are not clearly visible on the surface (see fig. 9). With regard to Area 2, several of Brunton and Engelbach's excavated glassworking kilns are visible as dark points in the survey, and in addition one unexcavated example was located further to the west in an area where the surface material includes a light scattering of vitrified material.

Conclusions

In the first six seasons of work at Gurob we have made satisfactory progress on several elements of our overall plan for the site: mapping, pottery surface collection, auger boring, geophysical survey, and excavation. As well as mapping some of the basic features of the town site, we have also begun to produce more detailed plans of some of the best surviving architectural features, such as the enigmatic circular mud-brick constructions in the northern palace building and a section of the town wall to the north-east of the main palace area. We are now well advanced in producing a fundamental corpus of the characteristic fabrics and forms of pottery vessels at Gurob, which can subsequently be compared with the existing New Kingdom corpora at Amarna, Memphis and other urban sites. The auger boring, alongside other geophysical techniques, has allowed us to gain a clearer sense of the sub-surface remains at Gurob, thus revealing more details of the harem palace and the surrounding community and landscape.

