

To Abydos and Back: A Conservator's Travelogue

In March, Suzanne Davis and I traveled to Cairo, Abydos, and Luxor, Egypt, on behalf of the University of Michigan's Middle Cemetery Project. During this short but productive trip, I attended a meeting with Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) officials regarding the site management plan and Visitors Center for Abydos. In response to a new emphasis in the SCA on the importance of foreign professionals providing training opportunities for Egyptian colleagues, Suzanne and I also participated in team-teaching a three-day field seminar with our colleagues from the Institute of Fine Arts at the site dig house, attended by fifteen Egyptian Inspectors and Conservators of Sohag Province. Finally, Suzanne was able to see firsthand the categories and conditions of sites, artifacts, and storage at Abydos and throughout Egypt, as well as to meet with conservators "in country" to discuss conservation strategies and supply sources. These experiences will be an invaluable background as we plan conservation facilities for the next excavation season of the Project in 2006.

Janet Richards, Associate Curator for Dynastic Egypt; Director, Abydos Middle Cemetery Project

My recent trip to Egypt began on March 14 when I joined the Kelsey's Associate Curator for Dynastic Egypt Janet Richards in Cairo. The primary purpose for our trip was to teach a special workshop at the site of Abydos, in southern Egypt, where Janet directs the Middle Cemetery Project, and to assess conservation needs at the site and supply sources in Egypt. The workshop, held for archaeological Inspectors in the Sohag Province where Abydos is located, would be three days long, with two days devoted to the history and archaeology of the site and one day devoted to archaeological conservation. We envisioned this workshop as the beginning of a program of ongoing activities at Abydos that will help engage local site inspectors as well as encourage collaboration between local Egyptian archaeologists and conservators and their foreign counterparts working in the area.

We began in Cairo, however; and on the first evening of the trip, Janet and I walked through the green, leafy Cairo neighborhood of Zamalek, passing lovely old villas, to our dinner destination, the palatial courtyard of the Cairo Marriot. Surrounded by beautiful Islamic architecture, I enjoyed the novelty of comfortable outdoor dining at night,

in March, the Michigan snow already forgotten.

The next day I had my first experience of the truly incredible preservation made possible by Egypt's arid climate. Janet arranged for us to visit normally off-limit areas at both Giza and Saqqara. At both sites I saw fascinating things, on a monumental scale (the Great Pyramid at Giza) and on a minute scale (individual faience tiles still decorating a 3rd Dynasty royal tomb at Saqqara, 4,800 years after they were first installed). Our visit to Saqqara was especially satisfying; here we were accompanied on our roving by a bright young site inspector named Saleh Suleiman, who is pursuing his master's degree in Egyptology at Cairo University.

My second day in Cairo we had an appointment with Dr. Wafaa El Saddik, Director of the Egyptian Museum. Dr. El Saddik, one of the busiest women in Cairo, took the time to sit with us and discuss her work. Among the museum's many current projects are the creation and testing of a new artifact database and a revamping of all the exhibit labels. Dr. El Saddik also made it possible for me to meet with the museum's conservation staff. The conservation laboratory, recently renovated with support from the American Research Center in Egypt,



Participants in the three-day workshop for Supreme Council of Antiquities Inspectors and Conservators at Abydos, Egypt. Photographed in the Royal Wadi at Abydos.



Kelsey conservator Suzanne Davis demonstrating conservation materials to students in the workshop, held at the dig house.