Plinthine on Lake Mareotis

In 2013 fieldwork at Kom el-Nugus (Plinthine) on Lake Mareotis focused on a large mound overlooking the ancient town. Sylvain Dhennin and Bérangère Redon describe this settlement with archaic and classical Greek imports, raising questions about the history and nature of the site.

The ancient Mareotis region is located on the north-western border of Egypt around Lake Mareotis (now Lake Mariut) and connected to the Canopic branch of the Nile via a network of canals. Following the foundation of Alexandria on its eastern limit in 332/331 BC, the region became a crucial area for contacts between Egypt and the Mediterranean world. Since 1998, the French Mission to Taposiris Magna (MFTM), directed by Marie-Françoise Boussac, has been investigating two sites: Abusir (ancient Taposiris Magna, see also EA 33, pp.12-14) and Kom el-Nugus, usually identified with Plinthine (see also inset on p.37).

Their Ptolemaic and Roman past is well-attested, whereas the pharaonic history of the region is almost unknown, and few Egyptologists have shown much interest in it, with the notable exceptions of Anthony De Coison, Alan Rowe and Jean Yoyotte. During the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty, a ‘gate’ - probably a fortress - named '3-n-h3st-tlmu (the ‘door of the foreign lands of the Libyans’) was probably located in the north-west of the area and can be identified with the ancient town of Khaset-Tjemehou. Unfortunately neither archaeological evidence nor texts provide much information about this border region, and the main entrance to Egypt for foreign shipping was further east, at Thonis (Heracleion) which had close links with Naukratis.

Since 2012 the MFTM has concentrated its fieldwork at Kom el-Nugus/Plinthine, whose existence in the pre-Hellenistic Period is suggested by references in the works of Hellanicus and Herodotus. In April 2013, we started the excavation of Plinthine’s kom, whose impressive dimensions (180m x 150m), horseshoe-shape and high location have long attracted the attention of travellers and historians, but its nature had remained unknown. The highest point is located at the north-west corner, and the kom stands, on average, 11m above the surrounding land. Many walls are still visible on the surface, sometimes following the crests of the mound. This is particularly so for a huge east-west wall in the south-west part of the kom, which can be followed for over 75m. A test trench
The identification of Kom el-Nugus as Plinthine

Of the two sites being studied by the French expedition, Taposiris Magna is the better known while Kom el-Nugus had long been neglected and its identification as ancient Plinthine sometimes questioned in the absence of written proof. The only previous fieldwork at the site, mainly in the necropolis, was by Achille Adriani in 1937, followed by the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation in the 1960s. In his publication, Adriani emphasized the limited duration of the settlement (mainly Hellenistic), and questioned, as had others, the chronology and function of the artificial kom overlooking the city: could it have been a fortress, an agora, a theatre or an amphitheatre? Ascertaining the duration of the settlement and explaining its decline was considered a priority by our expedition, which has concluded that the city might have suffered, probably as early as the late Hellenistic Period, from the development of Taposiris Magna as an alternative gateway into Egypt. Our fieldwork initially focused on the necropolis, west of the urban settlement, confirming the city’s short life span (from the late fourth/early third century BC until the late Hellenistic/early Roman Period) and providing evidence for signs of abandonment from the second century BC onwards. A survey of the ceramics and topographical and architectural mapping conducted under the direction of Thibaud Fournet in the urban areas since 2000 has highlighted the scale of an imposing city whose lower parts have been destroyed by modern construction and the development of fishponds in the lake. The surveys have also shown the density of urban occupation west of a wadi cutting the city in two from north to south on the axis of the man-made kom, and probably corresponding to a main axis through the city. This seems to confirm that the golden age of the lower town was during the Hellenistic Period, with a clear preponderance of ceramics of the second century BC. The discovery of a fragment of a Chian calyx of the sixth century BC during the survey led us to assume that an older occupation could have taken place at Plinthine, as suggested by Hellanicus (Fr. 155, apud Athenaeus, saying that wine was invented there) and Herodotus (who mentions, in his Histories II, 6, the gulf of Plinthine). The 2013 campaign of excavation on the kom has probably shown that our assumption was right.

of 80m² was excavated on either side of this wall and the results obtained are of great importance even if they are obviously provisional.

Several occupation phases were identified, the last one being the construction of the wall although only its massive foundations (at least 4.60m high and 2.75m wide) remain. Its nature and chronology are still uncertain, but its dimensions point to it having been an imposing enclosure wall (of a fortification?). The trench foundation has cut all the layers of the kom, showing that the mound was already in existence before the construction of the massive wall. The architectural and ceramic evidence suggests that the kom itself consists of accumulated settlement remains, including a dump and small units built with local stone or mud-brick walls.

Some of the artefacts found are noteworthy, such as three bronze basins, two of them found nested within each other, a bronze arrowhead and over 150 pumice stones found in a small pit, but the pottery is by far the
**Bérangère Redon** is a researcher at the French CNRS (HiSoMA-UMR 5189) and has conducted the excavations of the kom, with the help of Joachim Le Bomin (University of Paris 1), whom the writers warmly thank. **Sylvain Dhennin** is a scientific member of the IFAO and conducted the two first archaeological seasons in the town of Plinthine. The French Mission to Taposiris Magna (MFTM) is sponsored by the French Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and directed by Marie-Françoise Boussac, Professor at the University of Paris Ouest Nanterre. The writers would like to thank the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities for their kind authorisation and help in the work. Illustrations: © The French Mission to Taposiris Magna.

Most impressive find. For the study of this we are indebted to Zulema Barahona-Mendieta (University of Barcelona), Christiane Römer-Strehl (University of Bonn) and Mikaël Pesenti (University of Aix-en-Provence). According to their first estimation, 40% of the ceramics are Greek products, 15% are Levantine and 45% local. The imported products show a great diversity of provenances: Eastern Greece (Chios, Miletus, Clazomenae, Samos, Lesbos), Greece (Attica, Corinth), the Levant and Cyprus. The most common forms are Chian amphorae (some dating to as early as 625 BC) and amphorae of the type usually described as ‘torpedo jars’. Fine pottery has been found too, such as Ionian bowls, a rare oenochoe, a Corinthian aryballos, and a lekythos, alongside Egyptian pilgrim flasks and faience. The pottery chronology ranges from 625-450 BC, with a peak during the sixth century, confirming the antiquity of the kom.

The exceptional conservation of the pottery suggests some first hypotheses about the ancient settlement of Plinthine. Several amphorae and the bronze vessels were found complete in the dump or on the floors, indicating a primary use at the site. In addition, the nature and duration of the occupation, as well as the percentage of imports and the diversity of origins of production, suggest that they were imported in large numbers.

To date, the closest parallels for our material come from Thonis, Naukratis and Sais in the western Delta, and Tell Dafana and Tell Kedwa on Egypt’s eastern border. Tell Kedwa is a northern Sinai fortress of the seventh-sixth century BC and was first explored by an Israeli expedition led by Eliezer Oren in the 1970s. It is now under excavation by the Egyptian Ministry of State for Antiquities, and may be a comparable east Delta site to that of Plinthine in the west, serving the same function.

Like all the sites mentioned above, Plinthine seems to have acted as an entrance into Egyptian territory. According to Herodotus, Amasis (580-526 BC) compelled boats coming from the Greek world to go to Naukratis along the Canopic branch of the Nile – a decision usually interpreted as an attempt to control the trade of Greek merchants. However, we know that Greek products were not necessarily conveyed by Greek merchants (and one must remember the significant amount of near-eastern imports at Plinthine) and other evidence has already shown that the Naukratis monopoly was not totally observed. Future discoveries at Plinthine will hopefully contribute further information to this debate.