

# EXCAVATIONS AT TELL EL-AMARNA (EGYPT)

A progress report on work at Kom el-Nana  
supported by  
**The McDonald Institute**  
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under the direction of

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## SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The accompanying report is a preliminary account of excavations undertaken in the first quarter of 1989 as fieldwork supported by the McDonald Institute in Egypt at the ancient capital city of Tell el-Amarna, built c. 1350 B.C. by the Pharaoh Akhenaten. The particular part of the city chosen is a previously unexcavated royal enclosure locally called Kom el-Nana, and evidently a major religious and ceremonial centre. The work supported by the McDonald Institute covered three adjacent but separate parts of the site, in each case leading to the exposure of part of an individual building. These are identified by the terms "Central Platform", "South Shrine", and "North Shrine". With the first two, the 1989 excavations uncovered a substantial portion of each building, sufficient to gain a clear impression as to its character, but with the latter the presence of a substantial upper deposit of late Roman occupation limited the zone of exposure to a long strip which ran along the front edge of a building but scarcely impinged upon its interior. Apart from the architectural and stratigraphic findings made directly upon the sites the two shrines together yielded four thousand fragments of decorated stonework from the walls. A good start was made on labelling and storing them, but a major task yet to be undertaken is a detailed catalogue, and beyond this, when excavation is resumed at the shrines, lie probably several times as many fragments to be recorded and studied with a view to reconstructing the broad character of the decoration and how it related to the ground plans. In order to give an idea of the character of this material a token selection was drawn by the expedition's artist and is included within this report.

This season's work demonstrates that Kom el-Nana was one of the leading religious and ceremonial buildings at Amarna, and almost certainly is the last surviving royal building not yet excavated. This raises the question of its ancient identification. As yet none of the inscribed pieces makes reference to this, but in the introductory chapter, which reviews as well the evidence for other royal buildings in the southern zone at Amarna, the possibility is raised that Kom el-Nana is the Sun-Temple of Queen Nefertiti, a building known from Akhenaten's Early Proclamation to have been high on the list of planned royal projects at Amarna but the location of which has remained elusive.

The overall layout of Kom el-Nana is, in a very general way, apparent from its present surface appearance, recorded in a contour-survey carried out by the writer in September of this year during a return to the site, and from the results of excavation, although over the northern part a large area of Amarna-Period remains is obscured by a thick overlay of late Roman settlement (itself an important archaeological site). Kom el-Nana was a rectangular enclosure measuring 210 x 220 metres, surrounded by a thick mud brick wall buttressed on the outside, and subdivided into two unequal parts by a similarly constructed wall running east-west. The south enclosure was largely open space, a great arena or parade-ground in which attention focussed upon individual buildings set towards the back. The most prominent was the Central Platform, a pedestal of brick reached by ramps on which stood a building shaded by a large canopy supported on columns. Scenes in ancient tombs at Amarna show that buildings of this type were used by the royal family as places where large assemblies of people were reviewed. Other brick buildings as yet unexcavated lay beside it to the south, and these are targeted for excavation next season.

Between the Central Platform and the dividing wall stood a stone temple, the South Shrine. This had been built and decorated in the characteristic manner of Amarna stone buildings, in that the whole area of the building was first covered with a thick layer of gypsum concrete to serve as a foundation, and on this the lines of the building were first marked out in ink and then established by means of several foundation courses of stone blocks. After the end of the Amarna Period, probably in the main in the time of Ramesses II, the shrine suffered the fate of all stone buildings at Amarna in being demolished to provide building stone for new temples under construction elsewhere. The demolition was thorough, but left behind thousands of fragments which had broken from blocks as they were being removed, and large parts of the gypsum foundation layer still bearing the marks of the lowest stone course. The latter — the gypsum foundation — provides direct evidence for the plan of the building, and from the portion from the South Shrine so far uncovered it does already seem that it was not like the ideal Aten temple as known from excavation in the Central City and pictures in some of the Amarna rock tombs. It seems to have been a more conservative building, in two parts: a deep colonnaded portico standing in front of a series of rooms and with little trace of the individual altars with which ideal Aten temples were filled. On the decorated stone fragments were many cartouches of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, and of the Aten, in all cases of the latter except probably one having the

early form of the Aten's didactic name. This points to a date of construction in the first part of Akhenaten's reign:

#### **Wider considerations**

The excavations at Kom el-Nana were undertaken as a rescue project, although the processes of destruction are sufficiently gradual to allow for a fairly thorough investigation over many seasons. Basic documentation of the site in both its phases of occupation has to be the first priority. At the level of interpretation and research-interest a royal site at Amarna inevitably demands attention within the context of the history and religion of the Amarna Period. But beyond such specific and local questions stand two greater challenges of interpretation, functional and cognitive. For the first we have already established that several functionally distinct elements are present at Kom el-Nana: religious, ceremonial, residential, and productive (at least of food). Their interrelationship will become apparent, at a basic level at least, as the architectural plan and distribution patterns of finds are built up from continuing the excavation and subsequently interpreted, and, it is hoped, given more meaning through comparison with other areas of the city where similar large royal institutions have been found in the past though given only summary archaeological treatment. It should be noted that the part of Kom el-Nana given over to food production (a block of buildings on the north side) has already yielded organic deposits and animal bones. The physical use to which large royal structures in Egypt were put is poorly documented, and the relative completeness of Kom el-Nana offers a rare chance of serious investigation. It also has to be considered seriously that the design of the more formal parts of the site, and in particular the spatial dimension present, satisfied aesthetic, emotional and perhaps intellectual imperatives. From our present knowledge of Egyptian formal architecture some Amarna buildings are distinguished by their use of very large walled spaces serving as frames of reference for distinctive and isolated architectural features. Kom el-Nana is one of these (others being Maru-Aten and the Great Aten Temple, the former given a preliminary discussion in Chapter 2, and perhaps also the "Desert Altars" site, discussed briefly at the end of Chapter 3), and the full revelation of its design provides a point of departure for considering the kind of inner vision which is satisfied by layouts of this kind.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 The City of Amarna

The ancient site of (Tell) el-Amarna, in Minia Province, Egypt is the remains of the short-lived royal city called Akhetaten, built around 1350 B.C. by King Akhenaten to serve as a new capital and as a centre for his new and monotheistic cult of the sun-god, the Aten. In its heyday it contained the major temples and palaces for the king and his family, and housing for a population which has been variously estimated as having been between 20,000 and 50,000 (or even more) persons. Within a short time of the king's death (twelve years after its foundation), however, the court left the city, which was then progressively abandoned so that its whole span of occupation amounted to between only about fifteen and twenty years. Despite subsequent encroachments of the river bank and of later villages and agriculture a large part of the ruins survived until modern times on the desert. The dry natural conditions have given rise to excellent conditions of preservation both for buildings of mud brick (the most widely used material) and for artefacts and organic residues. Excavation at Amarna is thus justified not only by the search for more information about its enigmatic founder, but also because it is a unique base from which to study through archaeology and a range of related disciplines urban life and society in ancient Egypt.

#### 1.2 History of the project

Amarna is so large a site that modern excavation is bound to be highly selective. Its brief history, sparse later occupation, and siting on a desert surface which has remained almost constant until today provide considerable foreknowledge of the character of individual parts prior to excavation. It is thus possible to formulate unusually explicit research designs because certain factors — duration and general nature of occupation of individual parts of the site — are already known. The current programme of research also reflects, however, the current external pressure of land development in Egypt. Two years ago it became necessary to divert a large part of the expedition's resources to the excavation of an isolated outlier at Amarna known as Kom el-Nana which was threatened with destruction by the encroachments of local farming. The site had been identified in 1977 as the last unexcavated royal enclosure at Amarna, which had been reoccupied probably also for a fairly short time in the late Roman or early Christian period. The pottery from this later phase had earned for the site the designation "Roman camp", and this had discouraged earlier archaeologists from investigating it. During the Spring of 1987 a tract of land adjacent to Kom el-Nana was put under cultivation illicitly, posing a threat to the site itself. As a precaution the site was added to the expedition's concession. On arriving at the beginning of 1988 I found that the newly ploughed land now bore a crop of young wheat, and that encroachment on to the site itself was beginning. Kom el-Nana immediately became the expedition's main task, replacing for a while the research programme under way in the Main City.

The fieldwork currently supported by the McDonald Institute is a major element of this new project to investigate the totality of Kom el-Nana, both in its Amarna Period and in its late Roman phases. This in turn is a part of the research programme at Amarna conducted by The Egypt Exploration Society, which has held the archaeological concession for the city of Amarna from the Egyptian Government between 1921 and 1936, and since 1977.

#### 1.3 The Kom el-Nana team

Kom el-Nana has so far seen two seasons of fieldwork, February 22nd to April 7th, 1988, and January 24th to April 3rd, 1989. The expedition personnel for Kom el-Nana have been B. Kemp (director), Susan Cole, Imogen Grundon, Wendy Horton, Christopher Kirby, Peter Sheehan, and Anthony Thomas (site supervisors), Ian Mathieson (resistivity survey), Pamela Rose and Paul Nicholson (pottery), Imogen Grundon and Margaret Serpico (registrars), Andrew Boyce (artist),

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Delwen Samuel (archaeobotany), Dr Rosemary Luff (bones), Ann Cornwell (organics registrar), Gwilym Owen (photographer) and Mahmoud el-Said Mahdi and Talaat Fawzi Habib (EAO inspectors).

### 1.4 Acknowledgements

To Mahmud el-Said and Talaat Fawzi Habib and their colleagues at el-Minia, especially Mahmoud Hamza and Adel Hassan, and to Dr Ali el-Khouli and Dr Ali Hassan and members of the Permanent Committee in Cairo, an expression of gratitude is due for much assistance, and for permission to carry out the work. A special note of appreciation is due to Dr Ali el-Khouli for his strenuous efforts to protect the site of Kom el-Nana. Much assistance was afforded the expedition by the British Council in Cairo, and by Amanda Pike and Rosalind Haddon of the Hongkong Egyptian Bank, and it is a pleasure to record the hospitality of H.E. the British Ambassador to Cairo and Mrs Donatella Adams.

The excavations are under the auspices of and basically funded by The Egypt Exploration Society, with substantial support from the British Academy and from additional sources. The University of Cambridge, however, provides a home for much of the concomitant research, writing up and archiving via both the Faculty of Oriental Studies and the Department of Archaeology. Through the good offices of Professor A. Colin Renfrew the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Fieldwork and Research made a major contribution to the Amarna expedition in 1989, partly to enable the most daunting part of Kom el-Nana — the remains of the ceremonial area — to be tackled, and partly to support a research assistant, Pamela Rose. It is hard to acknowledge adequately generosity on this scale.

The present report does not provide coverage of all of the recent Amarna fieldwork, nor even all of that carried out at Kom el-Nana. Apart from what is necessary to appreciate the general character of the site the reporting is confined to the ceremonial area which gave to Kom el-Nana its particular character and which was the focus of the work specifically funded by the McDonald Institute.

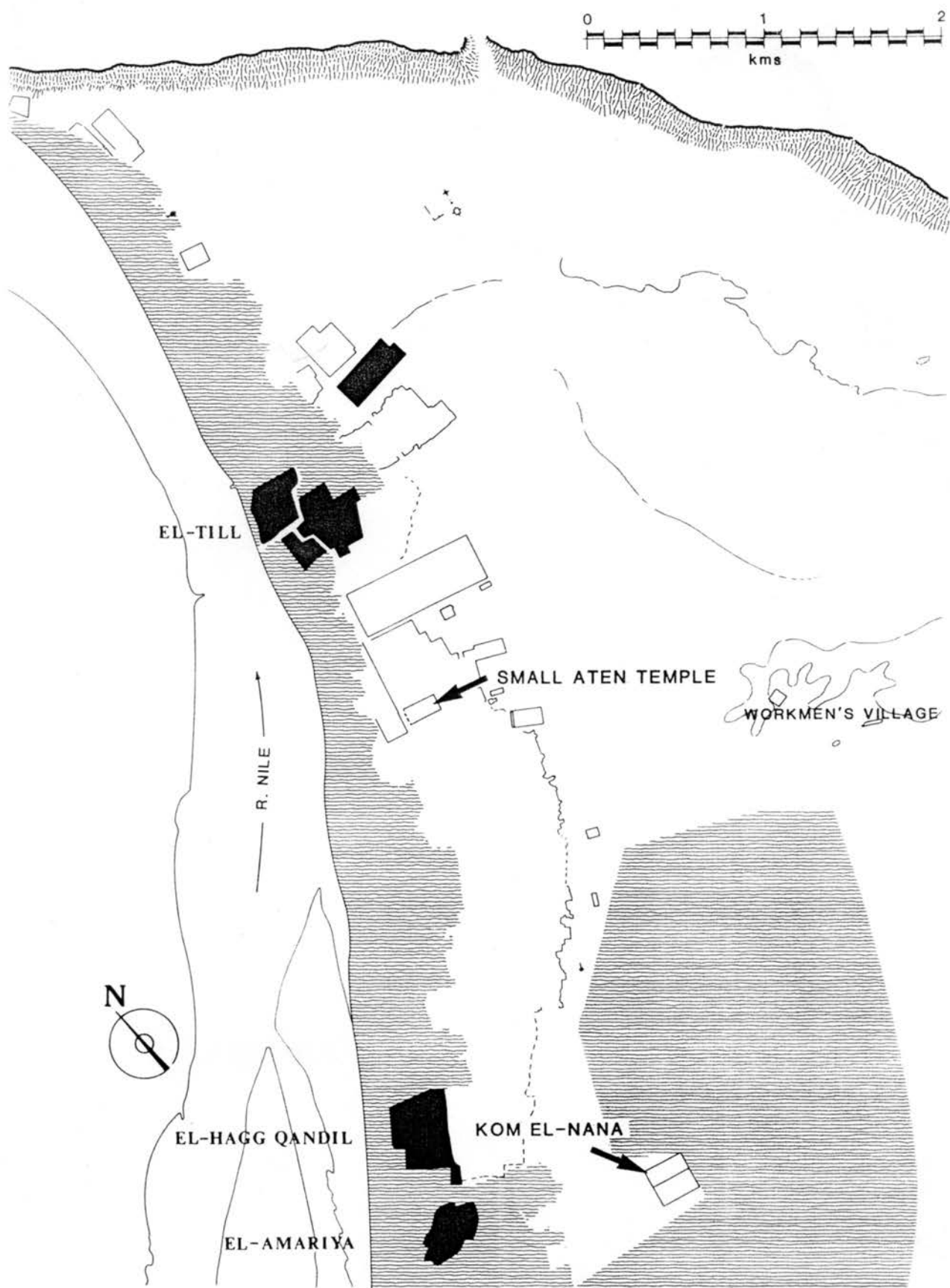


Figure 1.1. Outline map of Amarna showing areas of current fieldwork.