

PRESS RELEASE

Belgian Archaeological Mission to Elkab discovers important fragment of unique Old Kingdom royal statue

Since 2009, the Belgian Archaeological Mission to Elkab, directed by Dr. Dirk Huyge of the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, has focused its research on the settlement area of Elkab. Excavation campaigns in 2009, 2010 and 2012 have revealed the presence of a vast habitation area, situated within the Late Period Great Walls, immediately north and west of the temple zone. The oldest occupation phase dates back to the prehistoric Badarian culture (ca. 4200 BC); the most recent one concerns the early Old Kingdom (ca. 2700-2500 BC). The finds at Elkab demonstrate a continuous occupation of the site during almost two millennia. They bear witness to the on-the-spot gradual transition from a prehistoric (Neolithic/Predynastic) village lifestyle to a fully-developed Old Kingdom urban society. The latest test trenches executed at the site in February-March 2015 have allowed the mission to better document both the important 2nd Dynasty habitation layers, including substantial rectangular buildings with large walls and stone foundations, as well as the late Predynastic (Naqada III period) occupation.

The most exceptional find of the 2015 campaign, however, was that of a fragment (base and lower part of legs) of an Old Kingdom royal statue. The preserved height is 21.7 cm. The inscriptions on the fragment have been independently verified and read by Egyptologists Prof. John Coleman Darnell (Yale University, New Haven, US) and Dr. Luc Delvaux (Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels, Belgium). They give the almost complete titulary of king Sahure (ca. 2458-2446 BC), an illustrious pharaoh of the 5th Dynasty (the text was probably inscribed identically on either side of his legs). The statue, executed in fine-grained sandstone, undoubtedly represents the king seated on a throne. Its original height can be estimated at about 70 cm.

Sahure is the second king of the 5th Dynasty. He is best known for his vast funerary complex, including a pyramid and its mortuary and valley temples, at the royal cemetery of Abusir just north of Saqqara. Only two other certain statues of him are known. One, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, shows Sahure with the Nome (district) God from Coptos. The other previously known statue of Sahure is posthumous and dates to the Middle Kingdom. It was dedicated to Sahure by pharaoh Sesostris I and is conserved in the Cairo Museum.

The newly discovered statue of Sahure from Elkab was found by the Belgian Mission in March 2015 during a casual survey within the so-called Double Walls of Elkab. These walls, often considered to have been part of a circular town wall, date to the late Old Kingdom (ca. 2400-2300 BC). It is unknown how the statue ended up in the space between them. The presence of Sahure at Elkab should not come as a surprise as he sent expeditions to the Eastern Desert and areas beyond Egypt's southern border, such as Lower Nubia and the fabled country of Punt.

What is so remarkable about the Elkab Sahure statue, is that the feet are depicted as though completely wrapped-up within a close-fitting garment, suggesting that the statue was entirely mummiform. No parallels are known for the Elkab statue except in relief representations apparently showing the ruler in an all-enveloping robe. These are related to the royal Heb Sed ceremony, a ritual of renewal and regeneration intended to be celebrated by the king after a reign of 30 years had elapsed. Other statues from the period, such as the famous but almost two centuries older Djoser statue in the Cairo Museum (ca. 2630-2611 BC), show the long Heb Sed jubilee cloak with bare feet below. In this respect, the Elkab statue is absolutely unique. Such images of the ruler, represented as a deceased king before being rejuvenated through the Heb Sed ritual, could well have been the source of inspiration for the later general mummiform appearance of Osiris, god of the afterlife, the underworld and the dead.

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Photo Captions

Elkab Sahure_Photo 1: Stan Hendrickx and Dirk Huyge of the Belgian Archaeological Mission to Elkab

inspecting the Elkab Sahure statue (© RMAH, Brussels).

Elkab Sahure_Photo 2: The Elkab Sahure statue. View from above (© RMAH, Brussels).

Elkab Sahure_Photo 3: The Elkab Sahure statue. Frontal view (© RMAH, Brussels).