Excavations in North Sinai: Tell el-Borg I

Manfred Bietak

To cite this article: Manfred Bietak (2018): Excavations in North Sinai: Tell el-Borg I, Palestine Exploration Quarterly, DOI: 10.1080/00310328.2018.1424414

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00310328.2018.1424414

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 03 May 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 146

View Crossmark data
Excavations in North Sinai: Tell el-Borg I, by Hoffmeier, J.K. (ed.), 2014. Pp. xiv + 520 + CD with colour photographs. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns. ISBN 978-1-57506-305-8. Price: $99.50.

This book is dedicated to Harvey L. Miller who made the expedition possible from the financial side, and to Mohamed Abd-el Maksoud, the long-time researcher, excavator and Director General of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities for the Delta and Northern Sinai, who along with his French colleagues raised an international salvage campaign for the Northern Sinai when extensive land reclamation started there in the 1980s. James Hoffmeier—at that time professor at Wheaton College, now at Trinity College, Chicago—was one of those who responded and chose Tell el-Borg, a site c. 10 km east of the Suez Canal and c. 7 km northeast of El-Qantara East—a site spotted as T108 by the North Sinai Survey of Eliezer Oren from Beer Sheba University during the time of Israel’s occupation of the Sinai. The site proved to have been an important Egyptian military station along the Horus Road, leading along the northern Sinai to Rafia and Canaan. After preparations and surveys Hoffmeier undertook a field survey in 1999 and with a devoted team conducted excavations between 2000 and 2007, with a final study season in 2008. Since then he has followed this with an evaluation of the data.

It is a sizeable and important report about the results, which gives an instructive and well-illustrated picture of how the fieldwork was organised under the direction of James Hoffmeier and how it proceeded. It is not possible within a restricted paper to review all details but in the following the most important results will be highlighted.

An important contribution was achieved with chapter 2 “The Ways of Horus” and chapter 3 “The Geological Setting of Tell el-Borg” by James Hoffmeier and Stephen Moshier respectively. These reconstruct the topography and paleogeography of the easternmost edge of the Delta and the western part of northern Sinai. Evaluating satellite images and ground surveys, it was possible to identify the north-eastern coast of the Delta in the 2nd millennium BCE and to distinguish a sizeable paleo-lagoon. The latter dictated the setting of the frontier fortresses of the Egyptian New Kingdom. After the identification of the famous Egyptian frontier fortress Tjaru with Tell Hebwa I by Mohamed Abd el-Maksoud, this paleogeographic and topographic study also made it possible to equate other fortresses along the Horus road with the names represented on the campaign relief of Seti I carved on the northern outer wall of the Amun Temple in Karnak. Accordingly, Tell el-Borg was identified with the fortress Dwelling of the Lion, renamed under Ramses II as Dwelling of Ramesses, beloved of Amun and in papyrus Anastasi I the Dwelling of Sessy, a nickname of this king. The “Migdol of Seti I” could have been Eliezer Oren’s site T211 located at the southern tip of the paleo-lagoon, where also an old canal was discovered which was either a branch of the Pelusiac or a drain from the Ballah lakes. The further development of the Pelusiac is also better understood for the 1st millennium BCE, when this easternmost branch of the Delta shifted northwards and created new land north of the 2nd millennium coastal line, on which Tell Hebwa was erected.

Another important asset of the expedition was the discovery of two New Kingdom-fortresses, one dating epigraphically, and according to ceramic analysis, from the time of Amenhotep II, perhaps even as early as Thutmose III, onwards till the late 18th dynasty, the other fortress to the Ramesside period, perhaps built already under Horemheb. The older fort was identified mainly from its fosse. It encompassed a rectangular space of
c. 120 × 80 m, oriented east-south-east—west-north-west, leaving an open unprotected access to the gate in the east-south-east, directed to the Horus road.

The construction of the fosse gives important insights into the military architecture of that time. In this sandy environment, the fosse had to be secured. Lacking stone this was done with burnt bricks—unique thus far in fortress architecture. Only a few architectural remains of the 18th dynasty fortress could be traced, but the filling of the moat gave some more chronological information. Stamped amphora handles show that this fortress was abandoned during the late Amarna or post-Amarna period. The reason the fortress was abandoned appears to be the result of flooding since a new fortress was built soon afterwards on higher ground.

The moat of the new fortress was fortified with stone blocks, among them several door jambs inscribed with the name of Amenhotep II. In two cases the epithet of this king contained a reference to the frontier fortress of Tjaru: beloved of Amon-Ra who is in Tjaru or: foremost of Tjaru forever. As the names of Amun were erased in the Amarna period, this is proof that the official building of Amenhotep still stood at that time. A private stela previously published by Hoffmeier and K.A. Kitchen (E&L 17, 2007, 127–136) and republished here, shows that Reshef and Astarte were already worshipped in the Thutmosid period in the frontier region. Among these blocks were, surprisingly, numerous talatat from a building of Akhenaten. Either this pharaoh built a temple in the earlier fortress, or these blocks were removed from a building of the Amarna king erected in the Memphis area and thence shipped as building material to this frontier fortress.

The evidence seems to show that there already existed a system of frontier fortresses in the Thutmosid period and secondly, that a new system of fortifications was already begun before the reign of Seti I, most likely by Horemheb, who also constructed a large fortress at Tell el-Dab’a. It seems, therefore, that this king built an entire series of fortresses along the Horus Road.

The new fortress at Tell el-Borg was nearly square and measured c. 70 × 79.50 m; or approximately 150 × 135 Egyptian cubits (78.75 × 70.87 m). It remained intact till the time of the 20th Dynasty when the fortress was attacked and the door with the granite blocks and inscriptions of Ramses III destroyed by fire. The excavators associate this evidence with the assault of the Sea Peoples by land and by sea in the eighth year of Ramses III (c. 1188 BCE). James Hoffmeier proposes that the land- and the sea-battles occurred around and in the lagoon east of Tell el-Borg. This reconstruction is in the eyes of this reviewer convincing.

The geomagnetic survey within and around the fortress areas by Tomasz Herbich, from the Polish Academy of Sciences, was hampered by the large amount of metal fragments left behind in an area which was for a long time a military zone and brought about numerous recent anthropogenetic activities. Nevertheless, some features which related to the aim of the project could be discovered such as the remains of mudbrick walls, moats and unexplained ditches.

An asset of this publication is the report on the ceramic finds by Rexine Hummel. It demonstrates her life-long association with Egyptian pottery reflecting present standards concerning fabric and ware identification and descriptions, whilst the illustrations are of good quality.

Summing up, this is a very valuable publication of salvage archaeology in the Sinai, an area threatened by land reclamation. It is not always easy to piece together all information which is split into individual segments of the fieldwork report but in this book the editor has brought together the individual contributions of his team into a harmonious whole. It is to be deplored that due to other circumstances this kind of archaeological activity could not be continued in an area which is threatened by intensification of land levelling, agriculture, and its needed technical infrastructure such as canals and roads.
Note

1. The reviewer would like to thank David Aston for helping in English editing.

Manfred Bietak

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
https://doi.org/10.1080/00310328.2018.1424414

Check for updates