



INTERVIEW – Anna Stevens. On the archaeological work at the site of Tell el-Amarna, Egypt

By Rennan de Souza Lemos*

The city of Akhetaten –modern Tell el-Amarna– was the ephemeral capital of Egypt founded by the pharaoh Akhenaten during the so called Amarna Period. The city was constructed in the Middle Egypt in a virgin place and was abandoned within about fifteen years of occupation (approximately 1347-1332 BC). This site is of extreme importance since it provides evidence for many aspects of social life of the ancient Egyptians during the period of the New Kingdom.

Amarna has been excavated since 1890's, and since 1977 the excavations are led by the archaeologist Barry J. Kemp, of the University of Cambridge, in the Amarna Project.

Anna Stevens is Deputy Director of the Amarna Project. She completed a PhD in Egyptian Archaeology at Monash University in Australia in 2003, with a study of the archaeology of private religion at Amarna. She joined the Amarna Project in 2000, as excavator and object registrar, and from 2005–9 directed her own fieldwork project at the site — the Stone Village Survey. Her research interests are primarily the reconstruction of urban life, religion and ritual through material remains, and more recently the integration of funerary and settlement archaeology. Her publications include *Private Religion at Amarna: The Material Evidence* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2006) and *Busy Lives at Amarna. Excavations in the Main City (Grid 12 and the House of Ranefer, N49.18). 2 volumes* (London: Egypt Exploration Society and Amarna Trust, 2010), the latter co-authored with Barry Kemp.

Below is the text of the interview.

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Rennan Lemos: Can you summarize for us the history of the excavations at Amarna?

Anna Stevens: There have been a number of phases of excavation. The first archaeologist to work at the site was Flinders Petrie in 1891–2. He focused his work on parts of the Central City, the administrative and cultic heart of the ancient city, in an attempt to gain as much information from the site in the short time he had available for his work.

From 1911–14, the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft under the direction of Ludwig Borchardt undertook excavations within one of the residential zones of the city, the area known as the Main City. Most of his team were architects and they left us a remarkable set of house plans that, overall, still stand up to scrutiny today. Of course, some of the most well known artifacts to have been found at Amarna were also excavated by Borchardt, most notably the painted bust of Queen Nefertiti, found in the house of a sculptor named Thutmose.

From 1921–36, the London-based Egypt Exploration Society held the concession for the site, and embarked on an extensive and varied excavation campaign. They excavated many more houses in the riverside suburbs, but also at the Workmen’s Village, a small settlement in the desert east of the city proper. They also undertook major excavations in the temples, royal residences and administrative buildings of the Central City, and in other outlying temples and shrines on the outskirts of the city. Their excavation reports, *The City of Akhenaten, vols 1-3*, although much abbreviated in terms of what is expected of modern archaeological publications, remain fundamental sources for the archaeology of Amarna, as are those of their predecessors.

In 1977 Barry Kemp of the University of Cambridge resumed fieldwork at the site on behalf of the Egypt Exploration Society. His first goal was to produce a full survey of the main ruins, using the building plans produced by previous expeditions. In 1979, he then re-instigated a program of excavation at the site, which continues today. This program has included areas of housing, at the Workmen’s Village and in the riverside



city, industrial complexes, the North Palace, parts of the Central City, and the site of Kom el-Nana, where both an Amarna Period shrine complex and a 5th – 7th century monastery were investigated.

There have also been smaller-scale pieces of clearance and excavation at Amarna, by both foreign missions and the Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt; for example, in the Royal Wadi, location of the royal tombs, in the residential suburbs, and at Kom el-Nana.

RL: The Amarna Project has been developing a very important research program at the site. What recent archaeological work has been carried out in the various parts of the ancient city?

AS: In terms of fieldwork proper, in recent years there has been somewhat of a focus on Amarna's desert periphery – the flat plain of land between the riverside city and the cliffs of the high desert that form the eastern boundary of the site. This began with Dr Helen Fenwick's Desert Hinterland Survey, a project to map this stretch of land, which has just been completed. During this work she identified a number of cemeteries belonging to the ancient city, and this prompted excavations at of these, the South Tombs Cemetery. This work began in 2006, and is ongoing. Between 2005 and 2009 we also ran a survey and excavation project out at the Stone Village, which is a second small settlement lying a bit further out in the desert beyond the Workmen's Village. The issue both of where the dead of Amarna were buried, and also what function the Stone Village served, had long been major gaps in our understanding of Amarna. Another aspect of the site that needs much more attention is that of its later history, and in recent years Dr Gillian Pyke has been running a project to record an early Christian settlement that is dotted along the cliffs at the northern end of the Amarna plain.

As well as excavation proper, the Amarna Project runs a program of restoration, which has for many years now focused on the North Palace, under the supervision of Suresh



Dhargalkar, and of course there is always endless post-excavation work. One long-term project that is coming to completion is Dr Kristin Thompson's study of statue fragments recovered from the site. Another ongoing project is Dr Jacqueline Williamson's reconstruction of heavily fragmented wall reliefs from the Amarna Period shrine at Kom el-Nana, which she has now identified as the Sunshade of Nefertiti. Of course, we have many other specialists working on material from the excavations, some over very many years.

Anyone interested in the work of the Amarna Project should take a look at our website: www.amarnaproject.com

RL: As said in the introduction of the interview, Amarna is a very important site because it provides evidence for many aspects of social life. Like Deir el-Medina, for example, Amarna gives us the possibility to reconstruct the daily life and the religious practices of the common people. What kind of artifacts Amarna provides us information about this? How the archaeologist's work to realize daily life and religious practices is?

AS: The object assemblage at Amarna typically comprises such pieces as limestone furniture; stone tools; faience jewellery; sherds with potmarks; figurines; occasional inscriptions on jar labels; mud document sealings; occasional basketry and textile; vessels, in stone, faience, glass and, of course, pottery; and so on. This is the (non-perishable) material that formed the backdrop to everyday life in a New Kingdom city in ancient Egypt. Probably one of the most challenging aspects of archaeological research is to reconstruct everyday life from such 'mundane' material in ways that are nuanced and really meaningful. One benefit of a site like Amarna is its large scale: it brings the opportunity to compare artefact assemblages across different parts of the site. In a way, Amarna is known for its potential for this kind of spatial analysis, although at the same time, it is a potential that is yet to be fully realized because the artefact assemblages from the early excavations are so incomplete. We still have a lot of work to



do in producing and publishing object corpora from modern excavations that are as complete as possible.

One important assemblage that we do now have is a group of around 3000 objects from excavations undertaken from 2002–6 in a group of houses in the Main City, which have just recently been published. As we were recording the objects, we noticed that there was a large number of small pieces of flat blue faience probably used as inlays in stone or wooden items. There seemed far too many for these to have simply fallen out of finished reliefs in the houses themselves. So, one reasonable explanation is that people were manufacturing faience inlays in their homes and that these were intended for redistribution, possible to royal and official buildings, as though the Amarna suburbs were a kind of vast workshop for the state. So the process simply of taking a close-up view of this material can sometimes prompt ideas of how people spent their time and what their experiences of the ancient city might have been.

Things get more complicated when you are trying to tap into the spiritual component of people's lives, especially when this was so absorbed into everyday life and routine that it was not necessarily marked in overt material ways. Amarna, like all New Kingdom settlement sites, does however offer a range of material derived from 'everyday' religion, such as figurines, statuettes, pieces of jewellery, domestic altars, and, especially at the Workmen's Village, a group of private chapels used in part for the commemoration of deceased ancestors. In recent years there has been growing recognition of the importance of this kind of material for understanding religion beyond temple cult, and a move towards methodological frameworks drawn not necessarily from Egyptology but anthropology and material-culture studies, such as life-history and phenomenological approaches.

RL: You are now participating in the South Tombs Cemetery excavations. Can you tell us about the work that is being developed at this site? What were the impacts of the recent revolution that occurred in Egypt in the excavations at Amarna?



AS: The excavation at the South Tombs Cemetery is probably one of the most valuable pieces of fieldwork ever to have been undertaken at Amarna and, in my opinion, one of the most important field projects currently in Egypt. This was a cemetery for the ‘non-elite’ of Amarna, who basically seem to have included everyone beyond a very small circle of high-ranking officials. The excavations are giving us a dose of reality in terms of life at the ancient city – and it was incredibly harsh. There is something very moving about excavating a skeleton and, even as a non-expert, being able to see the vertebrae crushed together as a result of carrying loads that were too heavy – perhaps stone blocks during the construction of the city itself. It has been a long time since this idea of Amarna as a kind of garden city utopia had much currency, but in a way I think we still want to idealise the city a little. But it is hard to escape the data now coming in from the analysis of the bones, work that is headed by Professor Jerry Rose and Dr Melissa Zabecki. They are showing that this kind of spinal trauma is quite widespread at the cemetery, as are signs of dietary deficiencies in childhood, for example.

In broader terms, this is a valuable piece of fieldwork because it is giving us a snapshot of the health of a single population at a known period of time in the ancient world. Also, we have written sources from about this time that speak of a plague coming from Egypt, so there is intriguing, but difficult to answer, question of whether this affected the Amarna population. Archaeologically, with so few settlements surviving alongside cemeteries in Egypt, we also have a wonderful opportunity to try and write an integrated archaeology of settlement and cemetery (or, living and dying) through Amarna.

We are aiming to get a sample of 400 skeletons from the cemetery, and currently have just over half this amount, so we’re looking at a few more seasons of excavation yet. We had an excavation season scheduled for February/March of this year, but because of circumstances stemming from the Egyptian revolution, this had to be cancelled. We are hoping to be able to run a supplementary excavation season in November/December, but are waiting for permission from the Supreme Council of Antiquities. So, we are



keeping our fingers crossed, whilst acknowledging that Egypt has a lot more important things to deal with at the moment than the status of foreign archaeological expeditions.



Excavations at the South Tombs Cemetery. Photo courtesy of Anna Stevens.

RL: Finally, here in Brazil Egyptology is not a traditional area of studies and the difficulties are many. Only in few universities we have the possibility to study history and archaeology of ancient Egypt under the supervision of Egyptologists. Can you let to our students – and here I include myself – a message of encouragement?

AS: I undertook my studies in Australia, where Egyptology is also a relatively young and small academic discipline, so I can understand up to a point. It goes without saying that Egyptology is an incredibly difficult field to try and break into, and to maintain a career in. We are very fortunate to have a number of Australian-run field projects in Egypt, which provide invaluable opportunities for students to experience Egypt and fieldwork firsthand.



If you are trying to get a place on an excavation in Egypt, it is a great help if you have previous excavation experience. So, if archaeology is your thing, try and volunteer on local digs if you can. The other piece of advice that is often given to young scholars is to begin publishing as soon as possible. The ever-increasing number of journals that cater for postgraduate students offer a great opportunity to gain publication experience. Writing a book review, if not an article proper, can be a good way of getting started. Volunteering in museums with Egyptological collections is, of course, another possibility, and for those interested in pursuing a museum-based career, be aware that degrees in museum studies are increasingly expected for museum posts.

But try also to maintain perspective on things and set your own goals on what you want to achieve – it might be pursuing a career as a university professor, or it might be becoming a regular member of an archaeological expedition in Egypt, whilst maintaining a job in another field. Unfortunately, it is a very competitive discipline. But the decision of what you want out of Egyptology, and how much you're willing to give up for it, is a very personal one. Don't feel pressured into feeling that a formal teaching, research or museum post is the only mark of 'making it' as an Egyptologist.

The Amarna Project is financed by the Amarna Trust, a UK-registered charity. Anyone interested in supporting research and preservation at Amarna is invited to visit the Trust website at www.amarnatrust.com