

Investigating ancient settlements around Buto

The German Archaeological Institute has been excavating the major Delta city of Buto (Tell el-Farain) since the early 1980s. In 2010 a new project was launched, directed in the field by **Robert Schiestl**, to survey the surrounding area and investigate settlement patterns



The site of Kom el-Gir, view to the north-west

Following the work of the EES in the 1960s at Buto, the site has been under investigation by the German Archaeological Institute (DAI), Cairo for around 30 years. This work has provided ample archaeological confirmation for the written sources referring to the important Predynastic and Early Dynastic town of Buto. The existence of the settlement in the Old Kingdom can also be documented archaeologically. The very impressive *tell*, which is still well preserved, is dominated by structures from the Late Period to the Roman era. What remains something of a mystery, however, is the period of about 1,500 years from the late Old Kingdom to the late Third Intermediate Period. While the temple of *Wadjet* seems to have been in use in the New Kingdom, so far no traces of settlement have been found at the site for the First Intermediate Period, the Middle Kingdom, the Second Intermediate Period and the New Kingdom. Based on current evidence, this major town would seem to have been abandoned for 1,500 years. As odd as this may seem from a modern perspective, the abandonment, transfer and (re-)founding of settlements, both large and small, was probably not so uncommon in ancient Egypt. However, it can be assumed that it was not done without good reason, and it is not clear what occurred at Buto or what the specific implications were of such a process for the site and the region.

In 2010 a new project was, therefore, initiated by the DAI with funding provided by the Thyssen Foundation, to investigate the settlement history of the region

surrounding Buto. One of the first research questions to answer is whether patterns of settlement activity similar to those documented at Buto are observable on a regional basis. To date three seasons of surveying have been completed. The project coordinator is Stephan Seidlmayer, while in the field it is directed by the writer. The area surveyed to date measures about 22km x 25km and lies mostly to the north, east and south of Buto. Previous surveying activity in parts of this region has been conducted by Thomas von der Way, Pascale Ballet, Jeffrey Spencer, Penelope Wilson and Joanne Rowland.

In order to gain as complete a picture as possible of the settlement history of the region, the entire scope of archaeological sites is being documented, ranging from recording free-standing large *tells* to tracing evidence of destroyed sites. A position somewhat in between is taken by ancient sites partially or completely overbuilt by modern cemeteries or settlements. Some examples of these different categories of sites documented in the course of the survey will be presented here.

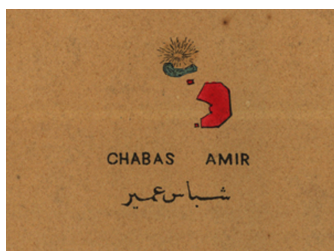
Large *tells* (or *koms*) with surfaces free of constructions are found mainly to the north and north-east of Buto. The site of **Kom el-Gir** (31 13 25 N/30 46 25 E; SCA 090118, EES Delta Survey No.331) lies about 4km north-east of Buto. The *tell* is currently about 20ha in extent, but the steep borders which rise sharply up to over 1m from the surrounding fields indicate that the edges have been cut away from a formerly larger site. In the north-west part the *tell* rises to a maximum height of about 5m above

the surrounding fields. Most of the surface seems to be undisturbed by recent activities, and in good condition. Pottery sherds, as well as glass fragments, are found on the surface of the entire site, with concentrations around pits left by robbers. Some small pieces of limestone, mostly very soft and corroded, are also found on the surface. In the first investigation of the site in the spring of 2010, eight boreholes were drilled along two transects. The boreholes cut through very thick settlement layers which provided large amounts of pottery sherds. Based on the dating of the sherds from the auger core drillings and the pottery from the surface survey, the site would seem to have been founded in the Late Ptolemaic or Early Roman Period (first century BC) and was mainly occupied during the Roman Period (until the fourth century AD). One auger core drilling provided some Late Roman material. In the western part of the *tell*, regularly laid out buildings can be detected on satellite images so it was decided to investigate this site more intensively by magnetometry. The first part of this work was executed by Tomasz Herbich in the autumn of 2011 and furnished very good results. The work will be continued in 2012 and the results will be presented in a future article.

An important role in locating ancient sites is played by historic maps and satellite imagery, both in preparation for the survey and during the seasons in the field. Because of land reclamation, settlement growth and industrialization, archaeological sites keep disappearing in the Delta, as is documented comprehensively by the EES Delta Survey (<http://ees.ac.uk/research/delta-survey.html>). Maps from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries show

sites which seem to be entirely lost today, but with the help of these maps and satellite images they can often be relocated in the field with the aid of surface surveying, auger core drilling and magnetometry. Many villages, or parts of them, in the Delta are built on elevated ground, indicating the existence of underlying ancient *tells*. Sites covered by modern constructions can be separated into partially and completely built-up *tells*. While in the former some open areas are still accessible for archaeological research, the latter are more challenging to investigate and subsurface work at such sites can often be achieved only with auger core drilling.

The large village of **Shabas Umayyir** (31 06 07 N/30 47 27 E) lies about 11km south-east of Buto. North-west of the village are two large modern cemeteries situated on top of *tells*, which have a height of up to 5m. Together the two cemeteries cover about 2.5ha. The edges of the *tells* and the fields surrounding them are very rich in Roman pottery, indicating that there had formerly been a substantial ancient site here. Two maps (see below) provide clues as to when they ceased being ancient settlement mounds and started being used as cemeteries. A cadastral map from 1884 shows the *tell* north-west of the village, with a small pond at its southern edge. The pond was probably the result of material having been removed from the *tell*, either to make bricks or to be used as fertiliser. At this time the surface of the *tell* was free of graves but by the time of the 1913 survey map, it had been established as a burial ground and the pond was much larger – presumably directly connected to the growth of the village. At a later point the pond was filled



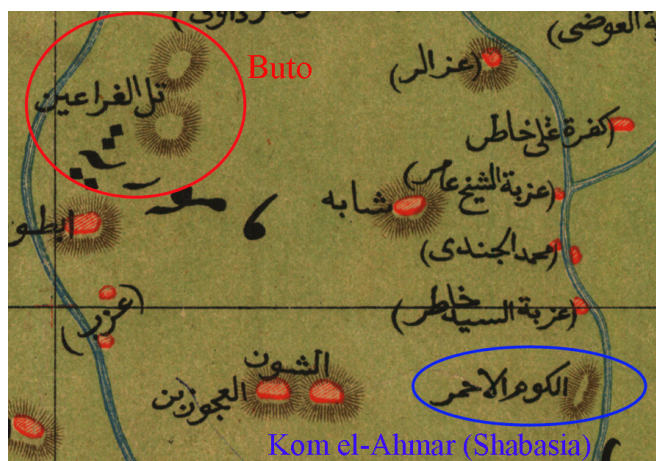
Shabas Umayyir.

Above: on a cadastral map of 1884 (District de Kafr el-Zayat), original scale 1:40.000.

Below: on the Survey of Egypt map, 1913 edition (VI-1 NW), original scale 1:50.000.

Right: satellite image showing the two tells in the north-west covered by cemeteries. The Survey's drill-core holes are marked as white dots
©GoogleEarth





Detail of the El-Falaki map of 1871, republished 1911, showing Tell el-Farain (Buto) and the site of Kom el-Ahmar, today the village of Shabasia. Original scale 1:100.000

in to expand the village, which has spread out and is now directly adjacent to the cemetery, as can be seen on the satellite image. Parts of the *tell* have been flattened and a school built there. An auger core drilling (marked as a white dot on the satellite image) on the slope of the south-western cemetery revealed settlement layers to a depth of about 3.5m below the surface level. The pottery dates predominantly to the Roman Period, beginning in the Late Ptolemaic or Early Roman Period and lasting to the Late Roman Period.

While cemeteries and settlements built on top of *tells* limit access to the ancient settlements below, it is still possible to gain a certain amount of archaeological information through auger core drilling. Thus, these villages and cemeteries – in a very real sense just the continuations of the ancient *tells* – also serve as a form of protection for the layers below. By contrast, ‘empty’ sites – that is, sites not overbuilt by villages or cemeteries and surrounded by open fields – are at greater risk of being levelled, either to increase agricultural land or to build industrial installations. A crucial question regarding such levelled sites in the survey area was whether any traces of settlements are still extant under the surface.

The village of **Shabasia** (31 09 54 N/30 47 59 E) lies 6km south-east of Buto, on the west bank of the Bahr Masraf Nashart. At the western edge of the village lies a cemetery on a small *tell*. Surface surveying of the fields to the west of the village provided large amounts of pottery, of Early to Late Roman date. Two pieces of Early Islamic glazed Aswan ware were also found. The site is about 700m long and 300m wide and satellite images show the outlines of a long narrow *tell*, marked by borders of fields, oriented approximately north-south. Parts of the *tell* remain under the western edge of the village and, in particular, the cemetery, while the greater part in the fields to the west had been levelled. Auger core drilling in the fields did not show any traces of remaining settlement layers and the *tell* must be considered lost here. The area chosen for drilling in the village, near the cemetery, was unfortunately massively disturbed by modern

construction. However, a remarkable source provided further confirmation for this *tell* and its given name. In 1871 the famous Egyptian geographer and cartographer El-Falaki issued the first topographic map of Egypt. The region in question was published at a scale of 1:100.000 and numerous ancient *tells* are shown. Three categories of sites are differentiated: ancient *tells* are represented as brown mounds with an empty plateau on top, modern villages are shown in red, and modern villages on elevated ground are marked as a combination of a brown mound with red village on top. Buto is shown as two distinct mounds under the name of Tell el-Farain. While the village of Shabasia did not then exist, a long narrow *tell*, roughly parallel to the Bahr Masraf Nashart, called **Kom el-Ahmar**, is shown in the location of Shabasia. The name, the ‘red mound’, is provided only in this source. Thus another Kom el-Ahmar, one of the most popular names for ancient settlement mounds, can be added to the list of Egyptian sites.

In conclusion, it is the relatively young sites, Roman and later, which are affected most severely by levelling. At the investigated sites of Roman or at the earliest Late Ptolemaic date, no older settlements were found beneath them. They all seem to be foundations of that period and were not continuations of pharaonic settlements. The earliest settlement in the region investigated to date is Kom el-Asfar, a foundation of the Third Intermediate Period. So far there is no new evidence for settlements around Buto of the fourth, third and second millennia BC.



The village of Shabasia showing the former tell of Kom el-Ahmar (red outline) under the western part of the village and fields. © GoogleEarth

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