

Barbara Adams, 1945-2002 by Renée Friedman and Barbara Lesko

In June of 2002, archaeology and particularly Egyptian archaeology lost one of its stars in the early death of Barbara Georgina Adams who was born on February 19, 1945 in Hammersmith, west of London, to Elaine and Charles Bishop. Barbara Adams had become a world recognized archaeologist, with many books to her credit and an expert on Predynastic Egypt, who worked for many years at the most important Predynastic site in Egypt, Hierakonpolis. Yet her career did not begin in archaeology, but in the very different science of entomology with work as a scientific assistant in the British Museum of Natural History, where she trained in museum procedures such as registration and labeling of specimens. She learned to dissect and mount delicate specimens using the microscope and became the assistant to the world expert in Symphyta, Mr. R.B. Benson. In 1964 Barbara transferred to the department of anthropology to assist Dr. K.P. Oakley. Here she gained some knowledge of early tools, Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic, and acquired a basic knowledge of human skeletal anatomy which would be an advantage in her future work at very early cemetery sites in Egypt.

Although she credited the Hollywood film “Valley of the Kings” with arousing her interest in ancient Egypt, Barbara’s employment at the Petrie Museum, which began in 1965, really started her learning about the Nile valley civilizations. There she worked with Professor Harry S. Smith who held the Edwards (See Amelia B. Edwards) Chair in Egyptian Archaeology at University College London, the position first held by the famous Sir William Mathew Flinders Petrie. Dr. Smith, a kind, pleasant as well as erudite gentleman, was credited by Barbara as her most important mentor who encouraged the fledgling to take flight in his own chosen field of Egyptian archaeology. She would learn more by “hands-on” experience in museums and in the field than in the classroom. Barbara’s first archaeological experience was in England, however, when she worked with the University of Leeds excavations in Yorkshire on deserted medieval villages. She assisted Don Brothwell, who was the Assistant Keeper of Anthropology at

the British Museum of Natural History, working with him on cemetery excavations such as Winchester in 1965. The following year she joined the University of Nottingham excavation of a Romano-British site at Dragonby, Lincolnshire. At the Petrie Museum, Barbara registered objects, answered inquiries, and did conservation work, notably pot reconstruction and bronze stabilization. Mud-incrusted ivories from the Main Deposit at Hierakonpolis were her first link to the archaeological site that would be a major part of her future work in Egypt. She married Robert F. Adams on September 27th, 1967, and credited her husband with being quite supportive of her career and her independence. That same year Barbara took an Archaeological Field Techniques and Surveying Course at the University of Cambridge. Her first trip to Egypt came in 1969: a general tour. In 1974 appeared her first book, *Ancient Hierakonpolis*, about 450 miles south of Cairo and the only major site of the Pre-dynastic period which is still preserved as a unit. Her book is a catalogue of objects in the Petrie Museum found by the early Twentieth Century excavators Quibell and Green in the alluvial town temple, where the main deposit contained some of the most important early dynastic objects, such as the Narmer Palette and the Scorpion Macehead.. Her real achievement was the publication and explication of the original field notes of F.W. Green, which she published as *Ancient Hierakonpolis Supplement* the same year. This began her career in the “excavation” of museum basements and archives throughout the United Kingdom, which would produced stunning results in the future.

By 1975, because of her extensive knowledge of the vast holdings of the Petrie Museum, Mrs. Adams was promoted to Academic Staff of the Petrie Museum as Assistant Curator. She produced the first guide book to the collection in 1977 (revised edition 1981) and supervised students learning conservation at London’s Institute of Archaeology. In 1976 Adams visited major museums in the United States, specifically to

study objects from the early excavation of Hierakonpolis by Quibell and Green (1898-1900). In 1978 she joined the University of the Negev excavation at Tell esh-Sharia, Israel, a Late Bronze-Iron Age site.

1980 was the year she joined the American Research Center- supported team headed by Michael A. Hoffman at Hierakonpolis, where she assisted in the excavation of the Pre-dynastic cemetery of the elite population, such as the princes in Locality 6, in 1980, '82, and '86, with study seasons devoted to that work in 1988 and 1992. This has been seen as the major turning point in her career as an archaeologist. She worked there also at the site of the ancient town Nekhen with Walter Fairervis in 1981 and '84, making an important contribution to the ceramic dating of Hoffman's stratigraphic sondage in Nekhen's square 10N5W. When Hoffman died unexpectedly and still quite young in 1990, the task of publishing his work fell to Barbara. As co-director of the expedition with Renee Friedman from 1996, Barbara kept the work going at this important site, resuming excavations in the elite cemetery which, although regarded as over-worked by earlier excavators, still yielded vital data, just as Barbara had anticipated. She discovered Egypt's first funerary masks and the earliest life-sized statue in what was the largest tomb (from 3600 B.C.). Hierakonpolis undoubtedly has provided the most information on the origin of Egyptian civilization thanks to such recent work at both the Predynastic cemetery and settlements and the Dynastic city site of Nekhen. Meanwhile in England too, Adams rediscovered significant ancient Egyptian objects such as the lions of Coptos (found in the Wellcome Museum storage and published in 1984) and objects from Garstang's excavation in the Fort cemetery at Hierakonpolis in the National Museums on Merseyside, Liverpool, in the Bolton Museum, and in both the British Museum and the University Museum, Swansea. Thus a better picture of the

culture of Hierakonpolis was now able to be reconstructed and studied.

The early 1980's saw Barbara much involved in fund raising for a new Petrie Museum (over which she was now Curator). To prepare herself and the museum for modernization, she attended seminars on the computerization of records and supervised a computer database for the collection. She was successful in obtaining a grant towards the cost of replacement of a whole archive collection, approximately 9000 cellulose nitrate negatives, and also for the conservation of wax encaustic Roman period mummy portraits.

Public lecturing, museum seminars and exhibits organized by Adams were means to disseminate information about the on-going discoveries that were throwing light on the origin of the Egyptian civilization and the rise of the city. Two trips to the United States followed this. In 1987 she worked with Michael Hoffman and the staff of the Hierakonpolis expedition on a traveling exhibition "The First Egyptians" organized initially in Columbia, South Carolina. Her books *The Fort Cemetery at Hierakonpolis* appeared in 1987 followed the next year by *Predynastic Egypt* (in the Shire Egyptology series). Back in England, Barbara organized the Friends of the Petrie Museum to coincide with the museum's re-opening in June, 1988 and remained the museum's guiding force in subsequent years. Traveling exhibitions of Predynastic and Early Dynastic material from the Petrie collection were sent to France (Marseilles) and she cooperated with the selection of antiquities for a large number of museum exhibitions during the 1980's and 1990's around the world.

Following Michael Hoffmann's untimely death due to cancer in 1991, Barbara Adams collaborated with fellow-expedition member Renee Friedman on a memorial volume for Hoffmann, traveling to Oakland California where Friedman was then located.

Later Adams would write that she was “most proud” of this volume: *The Followers of Horus*. The following year, 1992, took her to Tenerife in the Canary Islands as a visiting expert on Egyptian pottery in their Archaeological Museum.

In 1994, ‘95, and ‘96 Adams was awarded the Gertrude Caton-Thompson (q.v.) Egyptology Department grants by University College London towards comparative research in the Brussels Museum. In particular she had undertaken to study decorated greywacke vase fragments from the Umm el Qa’ab cemetery at Abydos, a work that she was able to complete and which will be published posthumously. In 1996 she journeyed to Melbourne, Australia to advise on the Predynastic and Dynastic Egyptian collection in the National Gallery of Victoria. By the autumn of 1997, Barbara Adams assumed the Directorship of resumed excavations in the locality of the elite cemetery at Hierakonpolis.

Her editorship of the Shire Egyptology Series, small books devoted to a single topic and written by experts, now numbering over 25, have provided up-to-date information on a variety of topics of interest to professionals and non-professionals, ranging from *Mummies* (her own, 1984 and 92) to *Textiles*, to *Pottery*, to *Warfare and Weapons*. The world of Egyptology and archaeology must mourn the early loss of such a productive woman scholar: museum curator, educator, and excavator. Particularly remarkable about her impressive career and her authorship of ten scholarly monographs is Barbara Adams’ lack of formal education in her field. She called her early experience at the Natural History Museum her true “alma mater” and credited Harry Smith for encouraging her to dare to follow her dreams, citing problems with other male university professors who apparently attempted to hold her back due, probably, to her lack of formal classroom study. Adams’ achievement was doubtless due to brilliance and determination

and to the doggedness she urged on younger people to which she added: “work hard, but on no account back stab to gain advancement.”

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