



Project Gallery

A new Ramesside settlement north of Mareotis Lake (Kom el-Nugus, Egypt)

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Although the site was supposedly founded in the Hellenistic period (332–31 BC), excavations at Kom el-Nugus/Plinthine have revealed a large town from the seventh century BC. The recent discovery of a major New Kingdom (c. 1550–1069 BC) settlement at the site is contributing to re-evaluation of the ancient history of northern Egypt.

Keywords: North Africa, Plinthine, New Kingdom, Ramesside, settlement

Introduction

Kom el-Nugus is 43km west of Alexandria, on a rock ridge between the Mediterranean Sea and Lake Mariout. Now covered with fig orchards, the site includes a Hellenistic necropolis to the west (Boussac *et al.* 2023) and a wide horseshoe-shaped mound (the ‘kom’) to the east (Figure 1). The mound opens to the south, towards a Hellenistic town stretching to the shores of the lake (Redon *et al.* 2023). Work undertaken in the centre of the kom has led to the unexpected discovery of a mudbrick settlement dating back to the New Kingdom (c. 1500–1069 BC), the first discovered north of Lake Mariout, in an area generally considered to have been occupied only from the Hellenistic period onwards.

The kom in the Hellenistic period

The first excavations on the upper part of the kom (undertaken in 2013) revealed, in several places, a thick wall composed of calcarenite (a large-grained limestone), which seems to have served as an enclosure in the Hellenistic period (Dhennin & Redon 2013; Redon 2022: 552–56). This wall was installed by cutting through the Saito-Persian settlement levels that have been the focus of previous excavation and publication (Redon 2021). In the west of the kom, at the top of the hill, this wall is accompanied by a Hellenistic dwelling (sector 5) dating from the third century BC (Boussac *et al.* 2016: 17–18). The Hellenistic settlement probably originally covered the entire perimeter of the kom but a substantial part of it has since been eroded. Towards the interior, the curious shape of the kom has long puzzled visitors (see list in Boussac 2015: 190) and the steep inward slope from the top of the hill to the centre has defied easy explanation.

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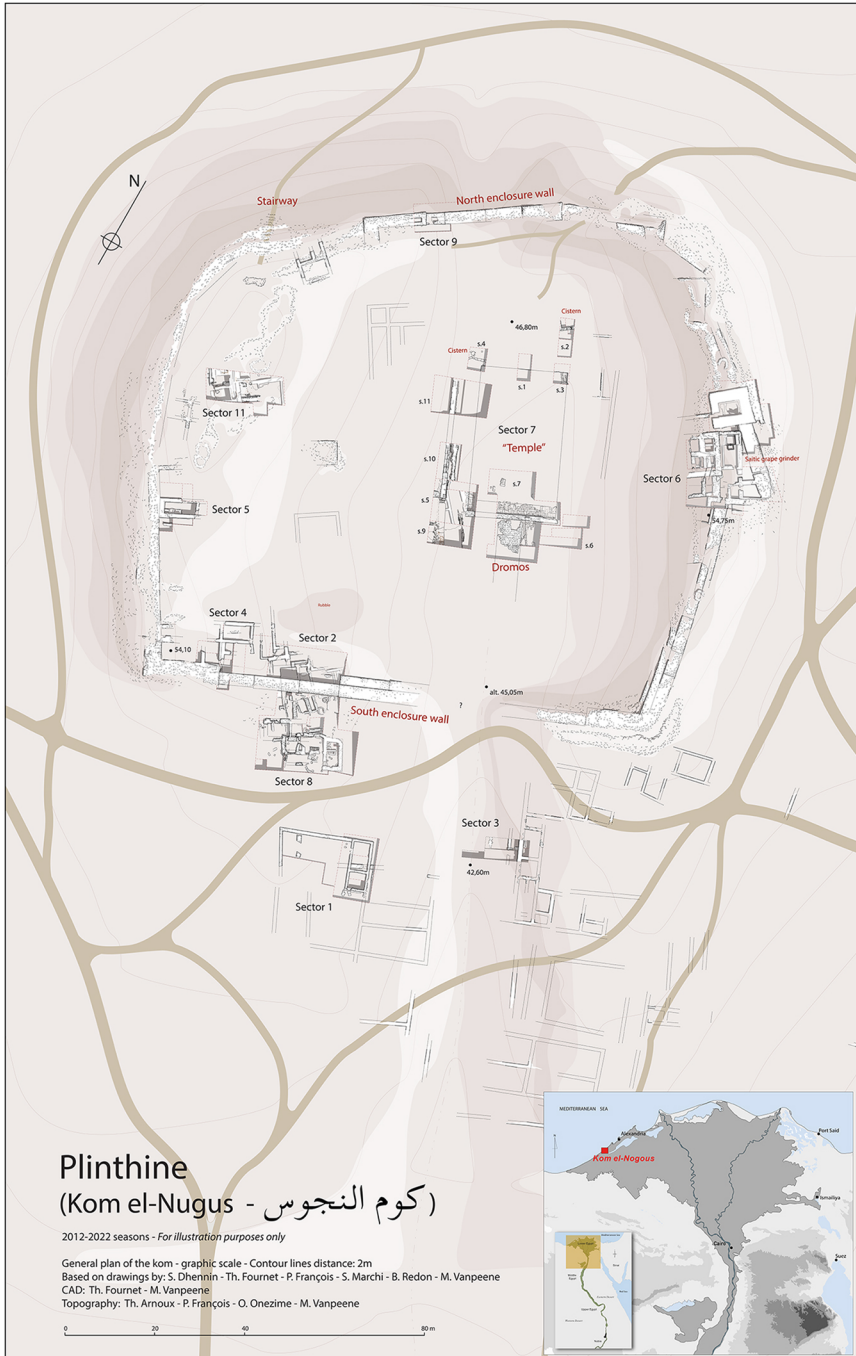


Figure 1. General plan and location of Kom el-Nugus (figure by T. Arnoux, T. Fournet, P. François & M. Vanpeene; © Mission Française de Taposiris Magna Plinthine).

Excavations in the centre of the kom have now revealed traces of Late Period and Third Intermediate Period levels (*c.* 664–332 BC and 1070–664 BC, respectively) that remain despite redevelopment of the site during the early Hellenistic period. In fact, Saito-Persian (seventh to mid-fifth centuries BC) installations appear to have been continuous between the western and eastern flanks of the kom, despite the impression left by the current topography. The central depression seems to be the result of a large excavation carried out in the early Hellenistic period to install a monumental calcarenite building, probably a temple (sector 7). All that remains of this building is its footprint on the bedrock, a few foundation elements and a portion of a dromos (entrance passage), also built in calcarenite, leading to the lake (Figure 2). The function of the building as a temple is suggested by its proportions and by the few epigraphic elements uncovered. A retaining wall (wall 729, built in the same local stone) (Figure 3) accompanied the building to hold back the rubble from the western slope of the kom. The wall was faced and adjusted on the inward surface only, and its western side was set against the installation trench dug into the older ruins. The monumental building was almost entirely dismantled, probably in successive waves from the Imperial period (30 BC–AD 476) onwards and the retaining wall was also partially plundered—only part of its elevation remains, on a thick foundation.

The discovery of a large New Kingdom settlement

A few items unearthed during surveys or excavations on the Hellenistic levels of the kom indicate the presence of an earlier New Kingdom settlement, probably related to wine production. This settlement was likely founded during the Eighteenth Dynasty (*c.* 1550–1292 BC), as shown by an amphora stamp bearing the name Merytaton—the daughter of Akhenaton and Nefertiti (Boussac *et al.* 2016: 19–20). Several reused elements are the only



Figure 2. The temple area, viewed from the south-east (figure by G. Pollin © Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale).



Figure 3. The retaining wall and plunder trenches, viewed from the north-east (figure by S. Dhennin).

remaining traces of New Kingdom stone monuments: a fragment of a stele with the cartouches of Seti II (Boussac *et al.* 2016: 21); several blocks from a temple dedicated by Ramses II (Figure 4); and fragments of private chapels from the Ramesside period (1292–1069 BC) (Dhennin & Somaglino 2022). Since 2022, the discovery of well-preserved levels and structures is bringing new dimensions to this New Kingdom settlement.

Between the retaining wall and the temple, a narrow space survived Hellenistic modifications, revealing elements of a New Kingdom mudbrick settlement (Figure 5). Two groups of buildings, arranged on either side of a street, have been uncovered. The first phase, damaged by a large Hellenistic pit (south of the trench), includes a set of walls (720, 721, 742 & probably 737) forming at least two rooms. The second phase consists of several distinct stages, the first of which saw the construction of two buildings. The northern-most building lies beneath the Hellenistic wall 729, except for its south-east corner (wall 714). The southern-most building follows an identical orientation and its north-east exterior corners (712 & 713) and several interior walls (735, 738 & 739) have survived. These two buildings are linked to a street that slopes slightly to the south, with a water-collecting system to drain surface water and protect the bases of the adobe walls (Figure 6).

In the second and third stages of phase 2, wall 712 was extended to create an inner space between the two buildings (712b). A doorway was built, with a stone threshold. This space was damaged in the Hellenistic period by the digging of a pit that was then filled in with stone rubble, before the construction of wall 729. The middle stages of phase 2 were accompanied by the rebuilding of the road; one stage includes several holes, probably dug later. One pit



Figure 4. Block depicting Ra-Horakhty from the temple of Ramses II (figure by G. Pollin © Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale).



Figure 5. General view of the New Kingdom settlement, from the south-east (figure by S. Dhennin).

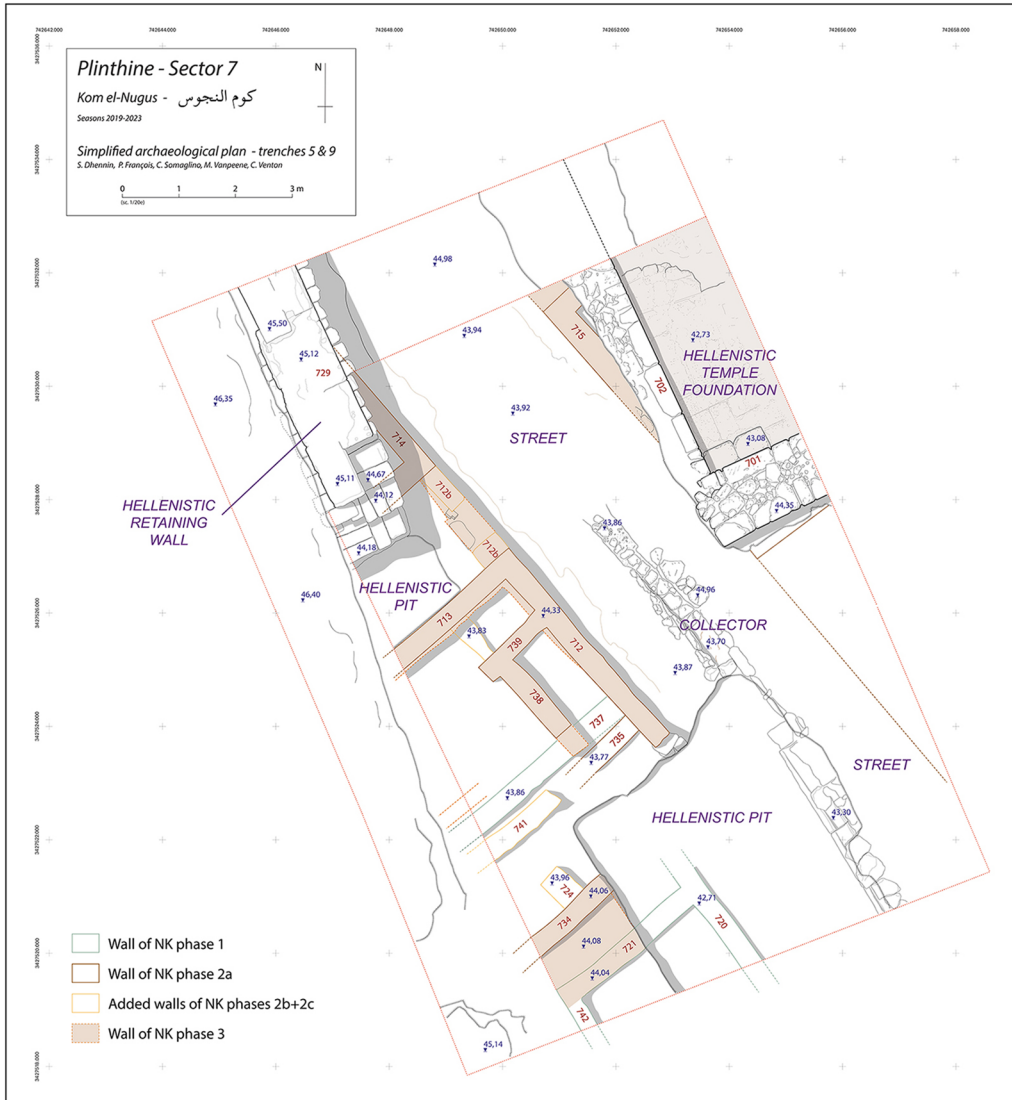


Figure 6. General plan of the excavation (figure by S. Dhennin, P. François, C. Somaglino, M. Vanpeene & C. Venton; © Mission Française de Taposiris Magna Plinthine).

contained a small hoard, consisting of five miniature ceramic bowls. The third phase is principally marked by the closing of the opening in wall 712b, using poor-quality adobes. At a similar time, walls 712 and 713 were repaired, rebuilt and thickened by a row of bricks on their inner faces. The last preserved phase (not illustrated) witnessed a final major reconstruction of the street. The associated building levels are poorly preserved, destroyed by Hellenistic constructions, but the few remaining elements indicate the presence of a floor that could have been used during the Third Intermediate Period.

Much work remains to be done at Kom el-Nugus, by extending the excavations. The name of the settlement has yet to be identified. The restructuring of the buildings—in stages

that appear to have taken place in quick succession—raises the possibility that this was a seasonal or intermittent settlement, as in the case of temporary military garrisons. At present, the finds do not allow us to give an adequate characterisation of the occupation; further work is needed to shed light on the New Kingdom history of the Mediterranean coast.

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