

## **New outpost of Egyptian civilization discovered in Israel**

**September 24, 1996**

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An ancient Egyptian colony, dating back to ca.3100-3000 B.C., has been discovered in Southern Israel by an archaeology team led by noted Near Eastern archaeologist Thomas Levy, a professor of anthropology and Judaic studies at the University of California, San Diego, and David Alon of the Joe Alon Regional Research Center in Israel.

The Egyptian settlement includes a monumental tomb, the first Egyptian-style tomb ever to be discovered in Israel during this early, formative period of Egyptian civilization. Excavations at the 32-acre Halif Terrace site, located in the Nahal Tillah region of Israel's northern Negev desert, also unearthed a wealth of new late Protodynastic/Early Dynastic Egyptian artifacts, including Egyptian bread molds, a rare incised serekh sign, seal impressions, faience and alabaster vessels, amulets, and numerous pottery vessels.

"This discovery gives us evidence of a full-blown Egyptian colony in Israel, right after the crystallization of the first Egyptian state," said Levy. "This provides us valuable insight into the nature of the Egyptians' expansion efforts in Israel during this early period, and it certainly gives added credence to the theory that the Egyptians may have had a much wider political and cultural sphere of influence in the region than was previously thought."

According to Levy, there are several different theories held by scholars about how the Egyptians interacted with and influenced the rest of the world. The predominant theory to date has been that they exerted their influence on other cultures primarily through egalitarian trade and exchange, exporting a great amount of their high prestige goods to other societies. This new discovery, however, gives added weight to a different theory: that the Egyptians established a colonial world system.

"Most archaeologists who have thought that the Egyptians might have had a colonial world system believed that Tel Erani, located 25 miles north of the Halif Terrace, was the seat of power in Israel," Levy said. "Now, what we have is a new Egyptian center. Though how Tel Erani and Nahal Tillah might have related to each other, we don't really know at this point."

There are also differing perspectives in the archaeological community on where the actual boundaries between Egypt and Israel were in ancient times. Depending on where the boundaries were, the Halif Terrace site may have actually been within the Egyptian boundaries during the late 4th-3rd Millennium B.C.

"Egyptians were known to have very profound and elaborate belief systems about the afterlife, and what was required to get there after death," said Levy. "One of these requirements was to die and be properly entombed on Egyptian soil. I think it's very likely that this part of Southern Israel was considered to be part of greater Egypt during this early period."

Although other societies were known to emulate the Egyptians, numerous factors, including the monumental tomb and various artifacts, led Levy and his research team to conclude that the colony is unmistakably Egyptian in origin.

Other contemporary tombs found in the region have been shaft tombs or burial caves, and are considered to be local "Canaanite" mortuary structures. The tomb discovered on the Halif Terrace is a characteristically Egyptian-style passageway tomb about 50 ft. long, carved out of rock. The tomb includes a burial chamber in which a fully articulated skeleton of a young woman of about 25 years old was found. She was buried on her left side in a fetal position, looking to the east. According to

Levy, this positioning is typical in an Egyptian-style burial.

Also unearthed at the site was a rare incised pottery sherd which bears the serekh symbol of King Narmer, one of the earliest historically known Egyptian kings. A serekh is a stylized representation of an Egyptian mudbrick temple or palace facade, usually written vertically in a rectangle with two compartments, with the upper compartment containing the name of the ancient Egyptian king. To date, about 18 incised serekh signs have been discovered in Israel, but only three of them can be positively identified with Narmer. Narmer is known to archaeologists for the distinctive large stone palette, discovered in southern Egypt in the 19th century, which contains a beautiful serekh with his name symbolized as a catfish and chisel.

Although few signs of daily domestic activities were found at the Halif Terrace site, more than 500 kilos of Egyptian bread molds were recovered, along with an Egyptian bread oven, called a tabun, which is quite different from the Canaanite bread ovens discovered in the region. According to Levy, the oven and bread molds were commonly used by the Egyptians in food preparation for both daily consumption and the afterlife, and are good indicators of the ethnic identity of the ancient inhabitants of the site.

"One thing we wondered about is what a tomb like this was doing in the middle of such a large settlement," said Levy. "Traditionally, Egyptians would bury their dead in cemeteries away from settlements. Part of the answer might be that this tomb could be part of a funerary temple, an early mortuary temple."

Levy's archaeological findings are the result of three years of excavation and research work in the Nahal Tillah region. A joint project of UCSD and the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, the work was funded in large part by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Artifacts from the site are housed in Israel, under the auspices of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

Levy, considered by many to be one of the world's most prolific and respected archaeologists now digging in Israel, has directed and co-directed numerous excavations in Israel, including those at Shiqmim and Gilat. The author of more than 70 publications on the late prehistory and early history (ca. 6000-3000 B.C.) of the Middle East, Levy's most recent edited book is *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land* (1995, Facts on File).

For more information, and to view and download visual images from the project, visit the Nahal Tillah web site at: <http://weber.ucsd.edu/Depts/Anthro/classes/tlevy>

Note: Photography, including color slides of the serekh symbol, the tomb, and the overall excavation site, is available. Professor Thomas E. Levy can be reached for interviews at (619) 534-2765.

(September 24, 1996)