

Cover Story

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF INDIANA JONES

by Liz Tilley



A skeleton being excavated at Saqqara. One of about 70 "common burials" excavated during Allan & Delma's first dig while endeavouring to get to the level of the tombs of the Nobles.

The call of the pyramids has proven too strong to resist for Newcastle surveyor, Allan Cavanagh.

"I suppose it's the excitement of uncovering previously unrecorded tombs, and discovering intact mummies, that draws me to return," says Allan.

Allan is currently on his second trip to Egypt as a volunteer surveyor with the archaeological team from the Australian Centre of Egyptology at Macquarie University, Sydney.

"Some of the tombs and shafts being excavated contain paintings

Old Boy started NBAS 1954 and hieroglyphs as bright and clear as the day they were painted," says Allan.

Accompanied by his wife, Delma, who takes on the role of survey assistant while in Egypt, Allan will continue to survey the approximately 100 sq metre Teti cemetery sit at the base of Teti's pyramid in Saqqara, approximately 35 km south of Cairo.

When Allan first went to Egypt for a month at the end of last year, he and Delma worked on two sites, one in Saqqara and another in Luxor.

This time they are returning to Saqqara to continue their work as

the archaeological team from Macquarie University progresses to the next stage of excavation.

Allan and Delma will arrive as another surveyor, Colin Cadman (of Lake Macquarie firm Cadman & Rolls), and his wife Jane, return after three weeks at the site.

First surveyor on site

Allan and Delma were the first professional surveyors with specialised equipment to work with the Macquarie University team.

Under the leadership of Professor Naguib Kanawati, Head of the School of Ancient History at Macquarie University, the team consists of recorders and restorers, a pottery expert, a skeletal specialist, two research students who generally supervise the excavations, a video specialist who records all work on the site and an inspector from the Egyptian Department of Antiquities who oversees all activities on the site.

"Last year we worked on the first stage. The work site was a large sand pit dotted with ancient mud brick and stone buildings, the oldest of which was about 2345BC.

"We had to detail, inside and out, two mud brick buildings, one stone building and four burial chambers, each situated at the bottom of a vertical shaft ranging between 15 and 20 metres deep," says Allan.

During Allan's two weeks at Saqqara in 1995, about 70 bodies, including two complete mummies, all about 3000 years old, were recovered. These bodies were buried in the "common cemetery" that was built upon the older tombs of the Nobles.

On his current trip, Allan and the team will be working on the next level, the much older cemetery containing bodies of the elite during King Teti's reign.

Cemetery of the King

While King Teti and Queen Iput were entombed in the pyramids that border the site, members of the extended family, such as the mother-in-law of King Teti's daughter, nobles and high officials of the King were buried in the surrounding Teti cemetery.

During the excavation operations, a team of about 50 Egyptians working with baskets and fazz (like a hoe) move huge amounts of sand.

Allan says the highlight of his first trip to Saqqara last year was undoubtedly the discovery of a previously unrecorded tomb.

"Everyone was so excited - it was a great experience to be part of it all," says Allan.

Mapping the site

On their first trip to Saqqara, Allan and Delma refined the rough grid system that had been developed by the archaeologists in an attempt to map the site.

They took all their equipment and arranged to pick up legs in Egypt. The combined weight of all gear transported, including reflectors, tapes, theodolite, laptop etc, together with clothes and credit card, was well in excess of 60kg.

"We acquired a set of legs and improvised stadia poles from painted tomato stakes, roadside reflectors and reflective tape, and for the highly accurate long distance traversing, prisms attached to the above-mentioned stakes with masking tape. All of the equipment performed satisfactorily and we even managed to traverse several kilometres out into the desert to existing survey marks with little difficulty," says Allan.

Upon returned from his first trip, Allan continued to refine the



To give an indication of the size of the mummies excavated from the site, Allan took 40 winks beside one of the exhumed mummies.

system to create rational and recoverable co-ordinates to provide a permanent record. On this trip Allan will set up amore sophisticated system and put in place a better method of recovering data. His ultimate aim is to set up a GIS for the site.

Another point of view

The involvement with the archaeological dig has generated a keen interest in Delma who completed an eight week course in hieroglyphs at Macquarie University earlier this year.

Delma is a Science and Biology teacher and finds the dig fascinating from a scientific point of view.

"When the skeletons are dug up you can often determine the cause of death. The specialists from Macquarie University would show

us deteriorated jawbones that indicated a tooth abscess - which would have eventually led to blood poisoning. Sometimes there were holes in the skull from spears.

"We could also see evidence of osteoporosis in some remains. At that time, if you lived to the age of 40 you were doing well," says Delma.

The Saqqara site in which Allan and Delma are working contains tombs that are 4,500 - 5,000 years old and is only 16 kms away from the Great Pyramids of Giza.

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Having just returned back from Egypt, Colin Cadman says he discovered quite a few "mathematical coincidences" which he is getting Allan Cavanagh to verify. Colin says one of the tombs uncovered during his time in Egypt appears to be located at exactly 90 degrees from another tomb. Both tombs appear to have exactly the same floor level despite being approximately 40 metres apart (and possibly having been constructed at different times). In one of the tombs, a room 12m X 8m, there are columns which are located perfectly symmetrically.

Colin says the trip was a wonderful experience which was capped with a dinner for Professor Kanawati's team at the Australian Embassy, a beautiful colonial building, in Cairo on Colin & Jane's last night.

Both Allan Cavanagh and Colin Cadman responded to a call for volunteer surveyors put out by Macquarie University via the Institution's NSW Division.