

Zaki Y. Saad (1901-1982).

A life for archaeology

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Zaki Youssef Saad was born 13 August 1901 in a village called Mit Ghamr in Daqahliya Province¹. He later attended Cairo University from where he graduated in 1930 with a diploma in archaeology. His early years of fieldwork were spent in Nubia where he worked with Walter Emery between 1931-34 as assistant to the Mission Archéologique to salvage monuments before the 2nd raise of Aswan dam and to where he would return in 1958. At this point, he participated in the Nubian campaign at Qustul as part of a committee appointed by the then Director of the Antiquities Department, Mustafa Amer, to salvage monuments before the completion of the Aswan High Dam.

Between 1935 and 1939 he assisted Emery in his excavations of the Early Dynastic elite mastaba tombs at North Saqqara, where he was particularly interested in the pottery. This work with Emery resulted in the co-authorship of *The Tomb of Hor-Aha* and *The tomb of Hemaka* and probably provided Saad with the training and special expertise to appreciate the importance of Early Dynastic remains.

From 1934 to 1940 he was appointed Director of the excavations of the Antiquities Department at Saqqara. Here, he conducted extensive work around the Step Pyramid of King Djoser, the area of the Unas causeway as well as in the Teti Cemetery where he discovered important tombs such as those of Mehu, Seshemnefer, Mereri and Wernu. In 1941, as part of his position of Chief Inspector at Giza and Saqqara, he also discovered the Late Period tomb of Amun-tefnakht at Saqqara. The excavation of this tomb was already funded by King Faruk I of Egypt who was to become a major sponsor for Saad's work. In 1944 he was appointed Keeper at the Cairo Museum while he was also the Director of excavations in the Early Dynastic cemetery of Helwan/Ezbet el-Walda. Soon after these excavations

1. This article was mainly sourced on the basis of Saad's own writings, personal communications with his daughter Mona, as well as short biographical contributions by Habachi, Attiatalla and Dawson & Uphill as well as in the North Carolina Biographical Clippings Files.

ended, in 1954, Saad continued his archaeological work until 1960 as Director of Inspectorates and Excavations for the Antiquities Department, after which he entered retirement. However, he was soon after employed by the American Embassy in Cairo where he worked as Senior Assistant at the Cultural Affairs Office from 1961 to 1963 and to escort American tourists around Egypt. Zaki Saad died on 18 September 1982 in Raleigh/North Carolina, aged 81.

Saad's Excavations at Helwan

In his role as Chief Inspector of the Giza and Saqqara districts in 1941, his area of responsibility also included the desert regions near Helwan. During a routine site visit he found debris and especially pottery fragments that had apparently just been dug up by illicit antiquities hunters and that Saad instantly recognised as Early Dynastic from his work with Emery at Saqqara². Or as he later noted, "of course, to the archaeologist such shards are of great importance as clues to the past. By studying them he can date them and thus date the tombs from which they came" (Saad 1969: 4). He reported this discovery to Etienne Drioton, the then Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, who suggested that excavations begin immediately in spite of the fact that the scholars involved found themselves at the height of World War II, which obviously had an enormous impact on the resourcing of archaeology throughout Europe and the Middle East (Perkins & Braidwood 1947: 419-420). In Egypt, this problem was overcome by the benevolence of King Faruk who had a keen interest in archaeology. Thus the Helwan project became the 'Royal Excavations at Helwan' and it was generously funded at the king's personal expense. The king, who visited the excavations on occasion, also financed the construction of a purpose-built dig house and site museum in Ezbet el-Walda, where Zaki Saad and his family resided during his years of work at Helwan³. It appears, though, as if he was initially under-resourced and in 1947 he wrote frustrated: "The results of the excavations should be published separately in detail every season. But, as I am working quite single handed without assistants... I have to attend the excavations all the day long, I have to record down the tombs, I have to examine the objects and to look after the restoration and arrangement of each, as well as, keep an eye on the photography" (Saad 1947, Introduction). At this time, he was assisted by the architect of the Antiquities Department, Fawzi Ibrahim, who produced the plans and maps of the site, as well as Mahmoud Shadouf, photographer at Saqqara and his photographic assistants whose descendents are still involved with the Helwan Inspectorate⁴. Later, Mohammed Abd-el-Tawwab-el-Hitta was seconded by Drioton to join Saad at Helwan as his assistant, and Saad profusely thanked him and all the others in his reports.

From the outset, it was clear that the excavations would be operating under significant time pressure; it was understood that antiquities thieves had already caused damage in the area. Farmers were known to have stored manure in the ancient tombs and were encouraged by 'authorised' dealers to procure antiquities for them⁵. Saad noted in his first report "the site has suffered greatly from previous plunder and digging",

2. It is not clear why he did not mention the work conducted by Larsen in 1937 who had excavated a small number of early tombs a few kilometers further north in an area that would later become part of the site that Saad excavated himself, *cf.* Larsen 1940.

3. This building today houses the local Antiquities Inspectorate of the Supreme Council of Antiquities.

4. I am grateful to Mrs. Hamdi Youssef and Mahmud Shazly for making available original prints from their fathers' photographic works which are included here.

5. It is possible that the stela of *Iren*, JE 88123, EM97-43, thus came into the private collection of King Faruk, although its time and circumstance of acquisition are not clear, as Saad said: "It was sent to him [the king] from the site of the excavations at Helwan in 1940 [before?] systematic excavations were carried out there" (Saad 1957: 31).



Fig. 3
Tomb 243.H.1
at Helwan with
burial and grave
goods in situ.

photographed in situ and the photographs always included a scale as well as a small sign with the tomb number (**fig. 3**). Further, all the objects that were collected received an ink label indicating their tomb and/or registration number and important pieces were frequently photographed, also including scale and label (**fig. 4**). Eventually, he may also have been accompanied by a professional conservator as the majority of objects, including stone vessels and intricate ivory objects, were expertly reconstructed and stabilised. Saad also classified the pottery and stone vessels following Emery's example which allowed him to quickly identify types of vessels in his daily diary entries. Probably because of the sheer amount of material, Saad had to decide where certain objects were to be stored best. While the important artefacts, such as jewellery, ivory objects and inscribed vessels or relief slabs (amounting to over 6000 pieces)



Fig. 4
Selection of
jewellery found
by Saad during
his 1st season
at Helwan.

were taken to the dig house at Ezbet el-Walda, where they were studied and exhibited until 1967, the thousands of complete pottery vessels and stone vessel fragments were stored in subterranean tomb structures on site, probably not too far from where they had been found (Smythe 2004; in press).

Certainly as a result of the royal patronage, Saad also enjoyed the services of the Egyptian Royal Air Force that produced 'nice' aerial photographs of the site and that he first published in one of his preliminary reports (Saad 1947: 176, n. 1, pl. XCV; Saad 1969: pl. 1). Further, the human remains came to be examined by D. E. Derry and Kamel Hussein of the Faculty of Medicine (presumably of Cairo University), who published some of the findings, including tabulations with measurements, photographs and X-rays of pathological features.

By the end of his last season at Helwan, in May 1954, Saad had uncovered a total of more than 10 000 tombs (**fig. 5-7**). At this point, he had already published a significant amount of data, including site maps, tomb plans, photographs and drawings of a variety of features and artefacts in the form of preliminary reports that were organised by seasons as well as a monograph on the important relief slabs from Helwan, his 'Ceiling Stelae', and he was certainly intent on continuing to publish everything as systematically as only possible. But the final three years already showed strain on the project as the seasons became shorter and more irregular and this is probably when modern historical events overshadowed the course and success of the Helwan excavations. In July 1952 a



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6



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Fig. 5
Helwan tomb
174.H.1

Fig. 6
Helwan tomb
356.H.1

Fig. 7
Helwan tomb
649.H.1

group called 'The Free Officers' organised a military coup that soon after forced King Faruk to abdicate and leave the country for Italy where he died in exile. As a result of the ensuing revolution of 1952 the 'Royal Excavations at Helwan' that owed its success to 'His majesty, Faruk the First, King of the Nile valley. He who revives and protects the Ancient Civilisation of Egypt, to whom science will be forever indebted' (Saad 1951: frontispiece), had ceased and continued for a short time only as 'Excavations at Helwan' under Saad's directorship. Although he had enjoyed the support of Etienne Drioton, the Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, it is clear that with the end of Faruk's reign came the end of funding for the Helwan project. The fact that this project and its leader so thrived under the support of the controversial king probably also resulted in a degree of political and ideological stigma in the time following the revolution which would have affected Saad's later work. Nevertheless, with the support of an American friend, Frank Autry, whom he met during one of his guided tours of Egypt in 1966, he was finally able to summarise and publish some of the findings from his work at Helwan in a small, but well-illustrated book, *The Excavations at Helwan. Art and Civilisation in the First and Second Egyptian Dynasties*. Saad's personal dedication of this book possibly alludes to those difficult times: "To my wife who through her kindness and self-denial encouraged me to carry on with my excavation and research work"⁸.

Today it is very easy to criticise one's professional forebears for their lack of scientific method and detail in their publications, but one should not forget that Flinders Petrie's scientific methods were not embraced by everyone and that only the 1960s saw the introduction of New Archaeology and with it a more scientific approach to archaeological investigations. Saad's work must be measured by the standards of his time as well as by the benefit it really had for our research today.

Saad himself was well aware that he could have done better and published more as the apologetic tone of his introduction of 1950 (Saad 1951: IX-X) would suggest. His preface to the *Ceiling Stelae* of 1952 also exhibits an unusual degree of humility:

⁸ Interestingly, his wife Marcelle was the sister of Rizkallah Macramallah who was also an archaeologist and who had uncovered Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom remains at Saqqara.

“I tried my best to give photographs and figures and explanations of the scenes and I shall welcome any critical observations which I am sure will be of great assistance to me. . . . He [Drioton] has been most kind in advising me on scientific details, knowledge of which I may lack.” His writings did not always receive praise (e.g. Needler 1970) and his conclusions were frequently criticised, especially those concerning the interpretation of the inscribed relief slabs from Helwan, Saad’s ‘Ceiling Stelae’ (cf. James 1962; Kaplony 1963: 361; Klasens 1965: 9, n. 8; Haeny 1971). However, it should be noted that his work was always endorsed by Drioton, who even wrote the introduction to the *Ceiling Stelae* and in it fully supported Saad’s conclusions. Many other eminent scholars of the time, in particular Herman Junker, were also in agreement that his interpretations were not only correct, but crucial to the understanding of the development of the mortuary cult in the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom Periods (Junker 1955: 52).

In spite of the criticism directed at his methodological and interpretive shortcomings it is necessary to point out that Saad’s work, especially his excavations at Helwan, made a significant contribution to the archaeology of Egypt in the 20th century and still has lasting effect today. For an archaeologist of his time it was especially unusual that he was not only interested in elite culture and monuments and that he afforded equal treatment to rich and poor burials. Saad was obviously not discouraged by the large number and poverty of many of the tombs he excavated and he rigorously recorded everything that was well-preserved and well-contexted. The field diaries and the collection of early photographs, that this writer has access to, contain a large number of information and unpublished burial photographs suggesting that he made a deliberate distinction between intact and plundered tombs and especially recorded the intact ones in their fullness. But he also recorded disturbed burials as well as very poor burials that were not provided with any grave goods and often even published them (e.g. Saad 1951: pl. 20-21; Saad 1969: pl. 116). In this regard, he did subscribe to relatively high scientific standards and repeatedly pointed out that the site required systematic excavation. It appears as if he did his best to follow this imperative. For example, the field diaries cover a period of 10 years and demonstrate that his level of recording did not suffer over time and that the format and depth of detail provided in his daily entries remained relatively consistent over this period during which he uncovered thousands of tombs.

If it was not for his tireless efforts, those over 10 000 tombs at Helwan would not have been excavated, thousands of artefacts not retrieved and recorded in their context, thousands of photographs not taken and plans not made, and they all probably would have fallen victim – not only to modern antiquities hunters – but in particular to the urban sprawl that the site has been subject to and that has already destroyed more than half of the cemetery. As a result of his methodical consistency of taking so many photographs, noting each tomb in the daily field diary and of labelling the artefacts he uncovered with their tomb number, the current Australian mission has been in the position to reconstruct and date a large number of contexts that today flow into the overall evaluation and analysis of the cemetery (e.g. Köhler 1998; 1999; 2002; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2005; Köhler & van den Brink 2002; Köhler & Smythe 2004; Köhler & Jones, in press; Smythe 2004; Smythe in press). It is only due to the disruptions caused by the post-revolutionary aftermath and the passing of time that the archive of Saad’s documentation is not more complete and that his work cannot be better utilised for modern analysis. And it is probably this degree of systematic archaeological documentation that makes Saad’s work stand out of the collective of many of his contemporaries, even many of those who followed, and that will ultimately pass the test of time.

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