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## THE COURSE OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE MID-FIRST MILLENNIUM B.C.E. SHAFT TOMBS AT ABUSIR (EGYPT)

*ABSTRACT: The paper presents a brief outline of the history of the anthropological examinations done in the western part of the Czech archaeological concession at the ancient Egyptian necropolis at Abusir near Cairo (Strouhal 1998, 1999, 2002a, b, c, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, Strouhal – Klír 2006, Strouhal – Němečková 2004, 2008, Strouhal – Němečková – Khattar 2007, Strouhal – Němečková – Kouba 2003, Malá 2012). The tombs that have been unearthed here from 1980 until present are dated to around the middle of the first millennium B.C.E.*

*KEY WORDS: Abusir (Egypt) – Late Period – Shaft tombs – Anthropology*

### INTRODUCTION

For many consecutive years, the anthropological research in the mid-first millennium B.C.E. tombs at Abusir was associated with Eugen Strouhal, whose deep knowledge, enthusiasm and unrelenting activity, along with his remarkable sense of humour, facilitated the work and contributed to the prompt and successful publication of its results. During his repeated participation in the work in this part of the Abusir necropolis (between 1996 and 2003) we spent many hours together in busy work interrupted by vivid discussions, be it in the burial chamber of Iufaa at

a depth of twenty metres below the ground, in a tent built in the close vicinity of Iufaa's enclosure or in our living premises at the Czech Embassy in Cairo. Because of all that, I sincerely hope that he would have taken pleasure in this small contribution dedicated to his memory.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Late Period cemetery, situated in the western part of the extensive necropolis named after the nearby village of Abusir, consists of five large shaft tombs and

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of about the same quantity of smaller burial structures. Of that number, three large and two smaller structures have been completely unearthed, namely those of Udjahorresnet (Bareš 1999), Iufaa (Bareš, Smoláriková 2008) and Menekhibnekau (Bareš, Smoláriková 2011), as well as those of Padihor (Coppens 2009) and the anonymous tomb dubbed R 3 (Smoláriková 2009a). Another large shaft tomb labelled AW6, whose owner remains unknown, is under excavation since 2015. Contrary to similar structures of its kind known from other parts of Egypt (especially Saqqara and Giza), the construction and period of use of the large shaft tombs situated at Abusir can be exactly dated to the last third of the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. (Bareš 2002).

Except for the tomb of Iufaa, that had served for the burials of five people at least, and maybe for the yet completely unexplored tomb AW6, all the other tombs excavated at Abusir so far have only been used for the burial of their owner. At the same time, all those tombs, except for the complex tomb of Iufaa, were thoroughly robbed in antiquity, most probably in the late Roman times (4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries A. D.). Because of that, mummies and /or the skeletal remains of the persons buried in those structures were only available for the anthropological examination in the complex tomb of Iufaa and, fortunately, to a certain degree in the tombs of Menekhibnekau, Padihor and the anonymous tomb R3 as well.

Methods used during the anthropological examination are summed up by E. Strouhal (Strouhal, Němečková 2008: 257, see also Strouhal 2009: 105). After cleaning and mending broken bones, the skeletons were examined cranio- and osteoscopically by the usual cranio- and osteometric techniques (Martin, Saller 1959, Eickstedt 1944, Lovejoy *et al.* 1985, Todd 1920, Vlček 1974). When possible, pathological changes were examined macroscopically, by standard X-rays or computed tomography, further microscopically by light and electron microscopy; stature was reconstructed according to tables for Afro-Americans (Trotter, Gleser 1952). Epigenetic features were selected from their listing in a recent Czech manual (Velemínský 1999). Stages of osteophytosis were classified as 0 (no), 1 (beginning, osteophytes less than 3 mm), 2 (progressed, more than 3 mm) and 3 (overbridging by contact or synostosis) (according to Stloukal, Vyhnaněk 1976; grades 0–3 instead of their 1–4).

In the tomb of Udjahorresnet, a personality otherwise well-known and much discussed (Lloyd 1982, Bareš 1999: 31–43, Lopez 2015: 73–165), no skeletal remains have been found in the massive double

sarcophagus that, according to a suggestion by M. Verner (1989: 289–290), might never had been used for burial. Most probably, however, the mummy of Udjahorresnet has been completely destroyed by tomb robbers (Bareš 1999: 79–80). A mandibular fragment found in the sand filling of the burial chamber and meticulously examined by E. Strouhal (1999) probably belonged to a male who died at a young age between 18 and 25 years and surely was intrusive.

As mentioned before, the tomb of Iufaa was a complex burial structure where five persons have been buried – Iufaa (25–30 years) himself in the main burial chamber (Bareš, Strouhal 2000: 11–14, Strouhal 1998, 2002a, 2006: 179–181), his sister Imakhetkherresnet (the only woman buried here, 35–45 years) and an anonymous elderly man (55–65 years) in the corridor surrounding the tomb from the southern side (Bareš *et al.* 2002: 102–103, 107–108, Bareš, Smoláriková 2008, 97–115) and priests Nekau (35–45 years) and Gemenefhorbak (30–40 years) in the smaller burial chambers that adjoined the bottom of the western lateral shaft from the west and north respectively (Bareš *et al.* 2005: 98–105, Strouhal 2004, 2005, 2007, Strouhal, Němečková 2008, Bareš, Smoláriková 2008: 116–138, 156–162). As all the skeletal remains from the tomb of Iufaa have been found intact – except for damage caused by the very high level of humidity present in their original places, their examination led to interesting results from the point of view of paleopathology as well (Strouhal 2002b, 2002c, Strouhal *et al.* 2003, Strouhal, Němečková 2008: 273–281). In this respect, especially the skeletal remains of the lady Imakhetkherresnet – found in the southern part of Iufaa's burial structure – aroused much attention due to a specific case of a sacral neurilemmoma (Bareš *et al.* 2003: 153–154, Strouhal, Němečková 2004, Bareš *et al.* 2005: 105, Strouhal 2006: 181, Strouhal *et al.* 2007, Strouhal, Němečková 2008: 275–279). In addition to that, three of the five persons buried in the complex structure of Iufaa shared a genetically bound anomaly, namely a biparietal thinness forming symmetrical depressions on both parietal bones (Strouhal, Němečková 2008: 273–274).

At the same time, the number of people buried here gave the researchers a rare opportunity to consider also their mutual relationships on the basis of the anthropological examination and epigraphic evidence. According to it, all the people who had been buried in the tomb of Iufaa seem to belong to one and the same family, although their exact positions in it and mutual relationships are still open to debate (Strouhal 2002b,

2002c, Strouhal, Němečková 2008: 281, Strouhal, Klír 2006). With a certain degree of probability, moreover, they might have been even linked to the owners of other large Late Period tombs that have been unearthed in this part of the cemetery at Abusir (Bareš 2010, Marković *in prep.*).

In the tomb of General Menekhibnekau, situated next to the structure of Iufaa, the burial chamber was badly damaged by ancient tomb robbers. Thus only scarce remnants of the skeleton of the tomb owner have been found here, thrown out from his sarcophagus and dispersed in sand around it (Bareš *et al.* 2008: 107). In spring 2011, those remains (a fragmented incomplete skeleton in a bad state of preservation; cranial bones not present at all) have briefly been documented and studied by P. Malá (now Zedníková); a morphological as well as a metrical analysis was carried out in field conditions. According to her, the skeleton belonged to a male of a very robust construction with well-marked muscular development, 50+ years old; the estimated stature of this individual was between 178 and 186 cm (as neither the femur nor the tibia were preserved enough, the right radius had to be used). Her report (Malá 2012) is planned to appear in the soon-to-published second volume of the final publication of the results of the archaeological and epigraphical work in the tomb of Menekhibnekau.

In addition to the scarcely preserved skeletal remains of its owner, the tomb of Menekhibnekau contained a separate underground series of corridors (Bareš *et al.* 2005: 97). This space, found intact, had served as a cachette for materials used by the ancient embalmers during the preparation of the mummy of the deceased (Smoláriková 2006b, Bareš *et al.* 2008: 110–112, Smoláriková 2009b, Bareš *et al.* 2010: 93–94, Smoláriková 2011). The rather numerous inscriptions preserved on the vessels (found in the cachette and mentioning, among others, the days of application of different materials) gave J. Janák and R. Landgráfová a unique opportunity to establish the course of the ancient Egyptian mummification process and the nature of substances used during it much more precisely (Bareš *et al.* 2008: 113–114, Bareš *et al.* 2010: 94–96, Janák, Landgráfová 2011).

In the tomb of Padihor, situated to the east of the burial complex of Iufaa (and perhaps the smallest structure of its kind that had been unearthed in Egypt until now), the mummy of the owner has again been robbed and smashed already in antiquity (Bareš *et al.* 2002: 105, 107–108, Coppens 2009: 46). The scarce

remnants of the skeletal remains, found partly inside the burial chamber and around the mouth of the main shaft of the tomb, have been studied by E. Strouhal and A. Němečková together with other anthropological finds from the nearby tomb of Iufaa (Strouhal, Němečková 2008: 281 and *passim*, see also Coppens 2009: 46). According to them, Padihor, who was not blood related to the family of Iufaa, despite his age of 28–32 years, had moderately progressed degenerative osteoarthritis in his right shoulder and both hip joints, connected perhaps with strenuous walking for long distances; strong slanting attrition on anterior side of his lower frontal teeth was caused by their use for some working or habitual activity.

In a small shaft tomb dubbed R3, situated some 60 metres to the north-east from the burial complex of Iufaa, a number of human bones (belonging to two adult males, 30–40 years and 20–25 years at the time of death and one adult female, 20–25 years) were found in front of the eastern side of the superstructure. A few human bones, which might have come from the original burial of the (yet anonymous) tomb owner, were uncovered in the burial chamber, scattered in sand around the partly destroyed sarcophagus (Bareš *et al.* 2003: 150, 154–155, Smoláriková 2006a: 45–47, Smoláriková 2009a: 85). They belonged to a 30–40 years old male, mummified by the use of resin. Both groups of anthropological finds have been thoroughly studied and published by E. Strouhal (2009).

Compared to other parts of the vast Abusir necropolis that (especially during the first millennium B.C.E.) have largely been used as a burying ground for the inhabitants of the nearby villages (Strouhal, Bareš 1993, Krejčí *et al.* 2008: 48–51, 232–233), the number of such late burials found in the wider area of the above-mentioned large shaft tombs is considerably smaller (Strouhal 2009: 109–110). Except for the human bones found scattered around the superstructures of the tombs of Padihor and R3 (mentioned above), two burials of small children (aged 3–4 years and one-and-half years, respectively) were unearthed inside the complex of subterranean rooms situated to the east from the enclosure wall of the tomb of Iufaa (and serving most probably to his mortuary cult). Both burials, badly damaged, were examined by E. Strouhal (Strouhal, Němečková 2008: 255). Two more skeletons, belonging to adults, were found close to the mouth of the southern lateral shaft in front of the southern side of Iufaa's enclosure (Bareš *et al.* 2003: 147–149). A poor burial of a child with arms

crossed on the chest (thus possibly dating from the Ptolemaic Period) was found close to the north-eastern corner of Udjahorresnet's tomb, together with an almost empty burial pit where only a fragment of an anthropoid coffin has been uncovered (Bareš 1999: 84).

## CONCLUSION

Summing up, the amount of anthropological material coming from the mid-first millennium B.C.E. shaft tombs situated in the western part of the Czech archaeological concession at Abusir, including ten adult males, two adult females and three children is rather limited (Strouhal 1999, 2009, Strouhal, Němečková 2008, Malá 2012). In spite of that, it has enabled interesting demographic analyses (Strouhal 2002b, 2002c, Strouhal, Němečková 2008: 281, Strouhal, Klír 2006, Bareš 2010) and yielded one of the oldest known examples of a rather rare disease – sacral neurilemmoma (Bareš *et al.* 2003: 153–154, Strouhal, Němečková 2004, Bareš *et al.* 2005: 105, Strouhal 2006: 181, Strouhal *et al.* 2007, Strouhal, Němečková 2008: 275–279).

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