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## Kom el-Gir, Central Northwesern Nile Delta, Egypt. New Insights into a Food Production Area in a Graeco-Roman Settlement. Results of the Seasons 2022 and 2023

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# Kom el-Gir, Central Northwestern Nile Delta, Egypt

## New Insights into a Food Production Area in a Graeco-Roman Settlement

Results of the Seasons 2022 and 2023

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### ABSTRACT

In 2022 and 2023, the investigations at Kom el-Gir, located in the central northwestern Delta near Buto (Tell el-Fara'in), focused on the remains of Graeco-Roman (last third of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC–7<sup>th</sup> century AD) structures built adjacent to and above a monumental enclosure that has not yet been interpreted in detail. Up to now, the earliest layers date to the middle Ptolemaic period (beginning of 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC) and provide a *terminus ante quem* for this enormous complex. A series of ovens and fireplaces used for baking bread and cooking most likely date to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and belong to one of the most recent phases in this area. The selected contexts belonging to this phase presented here provide an initial insight into the repertoire of pottery used for food production in Kom el-Gir.

### KEYWORDS

Graeco-Roman Egypt, Nile-Delta, food production, pottery

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Untersuchungen am Kom el-Gir, im zentralen nordwestlichen Delta gelegen, unweit von Buto (Tell el-Fara'in), fokussierten 2022 und 2023 auf Resten griechisch-römischer Bauten (letztes Drittel 4. Jahrhundert v. Chr.–7. Jahrhundert n. Chr.), die um und über einer bislang nicht näher zu interpretierenden monumentalen Struktur aus Lehmziegeln errichtet wurden. Die bisher ältesten ergrabenen Schichten, die in die Ptolemäerzeit (Anfang 2. Jahrhundert v. Chr.) datieren, gewähren einen *terminus ante quem* jener gewaltigen Anlage. Eine Gruppe von Öfen unterschiedlicher Machart und Feuerstellen, in denen Brot gebacken und gekocht wurde, gehören zu einer der jüngsten Nutzungsphasen (wohl 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr.) in diesem Bereich. Die zu diesen Phasen gehörenden, hier vorgelegten Kontexte vermitteln einen ersten Einblick in das Repertoire der Keramik der Nahrungsmittelproduktion in Kom el-Gir.

## SCHLAGWÖRTER

Griechisch-römisches Ägypten, Nildelta, Nahrungsmittelproduktion, Keramik

## Introduction

<sup>1</sup> The ancient settlement of Kom el-Gir is one of numerous towns and villages established in the Graeco-Roman period (last third of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC–7<sup>th</sup> century AD) in the central northwestern Delta of Egypt. The investigation of this site emerged from a regional study of the area around Buto (Tell el-Fara'in). Lying far in the north of the Delta and imagined as an ancient swampy landscape inhospitable to human settlements, this zone was long considered a marginal region of [ancient Egypt](#). In the Graeco-Roman period, however, numerous settlements were founded along now-defunct minor Nile branches and this area was intensely settled. One such settlement is Kom el-Gir, about 4 km northeast of [Buto \(Tell el-Fara'in\)](#), which is currently being studied by archaeological excavations.

<sup>2</sup> The site, today about 20 ha large, was investigated by magnetic prospection prior to the excavation. The ancient layout of the settlement emerged. It had been densely occupied by domestic buildings, many of which can be identified as tower houses and two monumental structures in the east<sup>1</sup>. All buildings follow a

<sup>1</sup> Schiestl 2016.

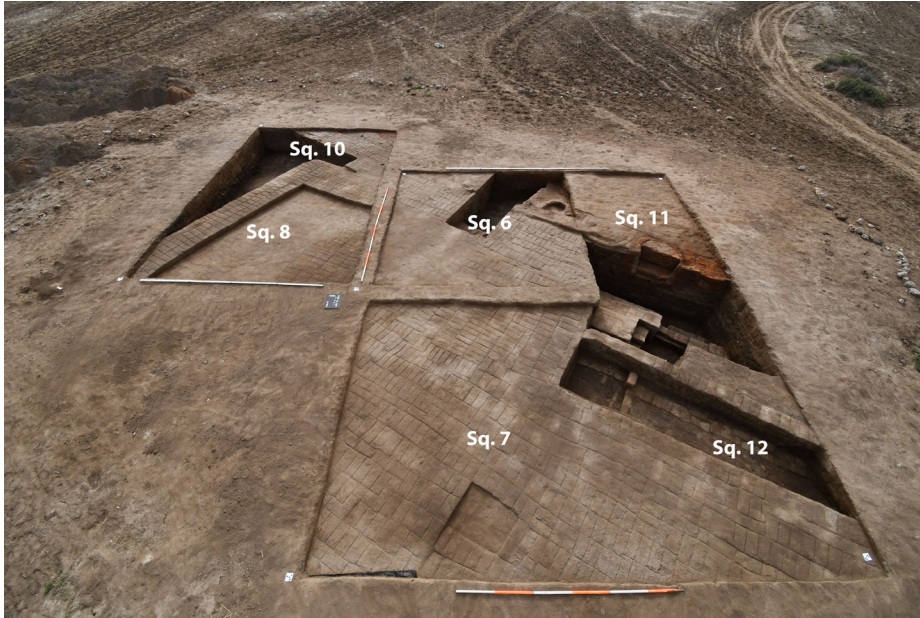


Fig. 1: Excavation area of season 2022 facing west

grid of roughly northeastern-southwestern orientation. The monumental structures are rectangular areas enclosed by thick mudbrick walls and measure, in the interior, c. 176 m × 118 m and 150 m × 90 m. They are placed at a right angle to each other, possibly sharing one wall or are directly contiguous. The former, larger structure's enclosure wall is equipped with bastions and rectangular projecting corner towers. Tentatively, it was interpreted as a fort, for which the best architectural parallels are Late Roman (4<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century AD), while the smaller enclosure was preliminarily designated as a temple enclosure wall.

3 As an area for a small-scale excavation, a corner of the larger monumental enclosure was chosen in continuation of an exploratory season in 2019<sup>2</sup>. The assumption was, based on magnetic prospection, that this was the southwestern corner tower of the fort. In the 2022 season, an area of 112.5 m<sup>2</sup> (three 5 m × 5 m squares, three 5 m × 2.5 m squares, Fig. 1) was excavated. Just a few centimetres below the surface, the massive brickwork of the monumental structure, made of sun-dried mud bricks, emerged, and some squares, such as squares 7 and 8, were almost entirely filled by this massive wall. However, at the edges of the structure, on top of the wall and adjacent to it, features appeared that abutted and enveloped this monumental building.

4 In the excavation season 2022 and the study season 2023, two things became apparent: Firstly, the monumental structure was overbuilt by a range of domestic structures, secondly, the study of the large amounts of pottery associated with these structures enabled us to finer date the layers. While the horizon of the construction of the monumental structure has not yet been reached, contexts overbuilding it can now be dated to the Ptolemaic period (beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), providing a *terminus ante quem* for its erection. To understand the layout, function and date of the monumental structure itself, further excavations were conducted in spring 2024.

5 The area uncovered is, as of yet, too small to reconstruct any layouts of the domestic structures attached to and covering the monumental structure. The character of the pottery from all contexts, however, is domestic, consisting of a mixture of kitchen- and tableware, storage vessels and transportation vessels of

2 Schiestl 2019.



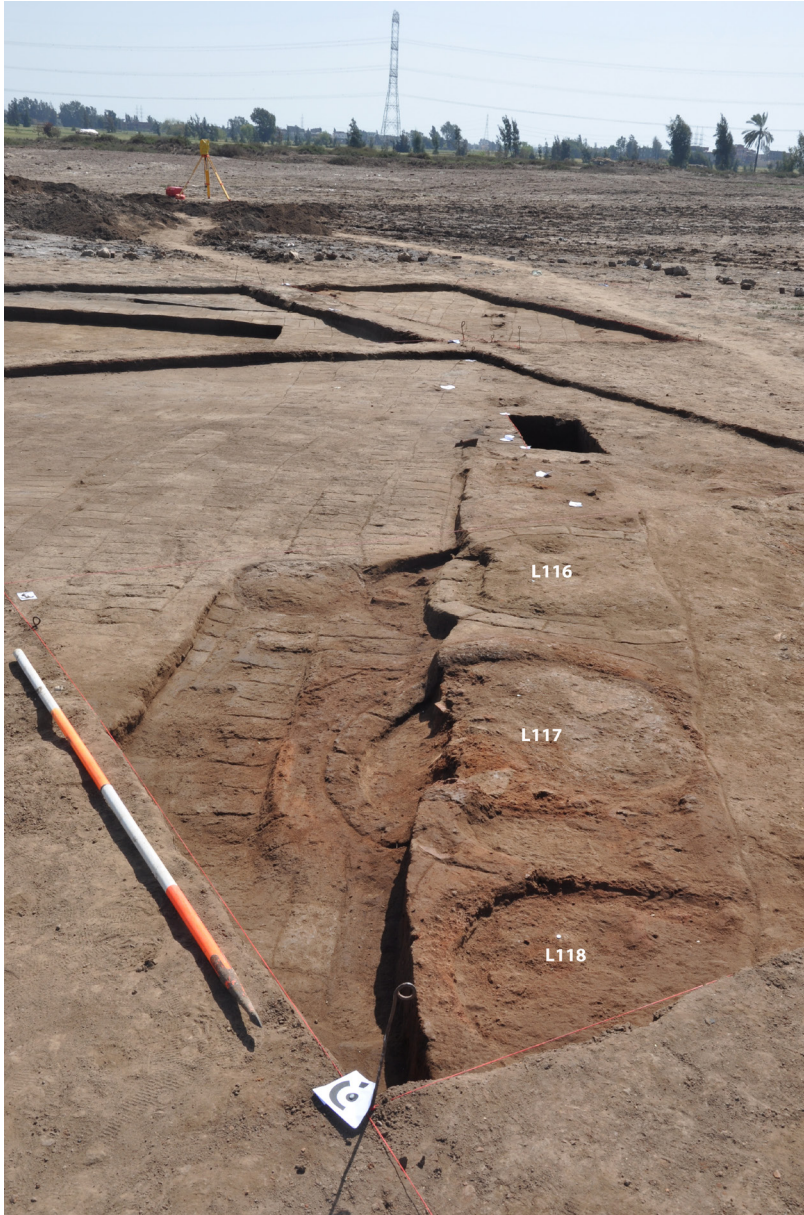


Fig. 2: Battery of ovens L116, 117, 118

Ptolemaic to Roman production (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC–2<sup>nd</sup> century AD). Even if the architectural outlines of the domestic structures are lacking, the area is already very interesting as we could identify specific domestic activities in one of the latest phases that shall be discussed in the following. Along the western edge of the massive mud brick structure in squares 11 and 6, a series of ovens and fireplaces were uncovered (see Fig. 1).

## A Roman Food Production Area

6 The space of this food production area was organized into a bread-baking section in the north (L118, 117 and 116) and an area for the preparation of meat and fish in the south (L105, 106, 108, 111, 119, 122, 123, 125 and 136). A similar separation of space has been observed in other domestic kitchen contexts<sup>3</sup>. The three circular ovens in the north cut into walls built on top of the massive structure. These later walls still maintain the general orientation, that is, northeast–southwest. Ovens are usually built in open spaces, such as courtyards, and often against walls. Here, however, no architectural features contemporary to the ovens remain, which would enable a reconstruction of their original setting. One could speculate that parts of the ruins of the monumental structure to the east of this kitchen zone were still standing, providing a protective wall.

7 Some ovens cut into a layer (L104) rich in pottery, which has been tentatively dated to the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Based on this *terminus post quem* and the ceramics from the ovens discussed below, this kitchen area can be dated to the mid-Imperial Roman period, most likely the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.

8 In the north of this zone is a battery of three ovens built next to each other, L118, 117 and 116 (Fig. 2). The grouping of three ovens has been often observed from the Late Period (11<sup>th</sup> century BC–last third of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC) to the Graeco-Roman period (last third of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC–7<sup>th</sup> century AD)<sup>4</sup>. They are of

<sup>3</sup> Von Pilgrim et al. 2008, 317 (Syene).

<sup>4</sup> Von Pilgrim et al. 2008, 321–323; von Pilgrim – Müller 2012–2013, 7 (Syene); Redon – Faucher 2014, fig. 3. (Samut North); Crépy et al. 2023, fig. 3 (Ghozza).



Fig. 3: Bread moulds in situ in oven L117



Fig. 4: Bread moulds from L117

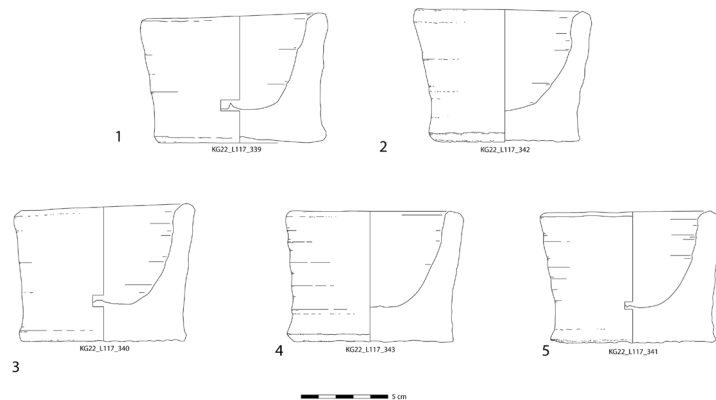


Fig. 5:  
Drawings of bread  
moulds from L117

similar size with interior diameters ranging from c. 90 cm to 1.1 m. The southern two, L117 and 116, are built of sun-dried mud bricks, 24 to 27 cm long and 12 to 14 cm wide. On the interior, they have been burnt red, and in some parts, black. No brick lining was used for the northernmost oven, L118.

9 The best-preserved oven is L117, in the middle, which still was extant to a height of c. 66 cm. Inside, five intact, mug-shaped, small bread moulds were found, lying on a thin bed of sand (Figs. 3. 4. 5). Some charred fragments of cereals from the filling of the oven could be identified, such as barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) and emmer (*Triticum cf. dicoccum*)<sup>5</sup>.

10 These bread moulds are roughly made, probably on a slow wheel. The vessels' walls are upright, with an often slightly ribbed surface, and they have a flat base. They are about 10 cm wide at the opening of the vessel and usually about 7.5 cm tall and made of alluvial clay. Similar examples are chronologically heterogeneous and known in the Nile Valley, the Delta and Eastern desert sites from Ptolemaic to Late Roman times. Some pieces have also been found on the surface at Kom el-Gir<sup>6</sup>. Only due to stratigraphic reasons the pots most likely date to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, as the contexts cut layers currently dated to the Roman period. They thus correspond to parallel finds in similar contexts from Mons Claudianus and Mons Porphyrites<sup>7</sup>.

11 Adjacent to the battery of the three ovens discussed above is a zone of nine smaller circular ovens and fireplaces. One is immediately to the east of the oven L116; the others lie to the southwest (Fig. 6).

12 These installations are clustered closely together, and some cut into each other. They display, with one exception (L105), no brick lining, but their sides consist of burnt mud. The interior diameters range from 23 to 70 cm, and the heights are preserved up to 50 cm. Interiors of better-preserved ones show multiple ashy layers, with light and dark ashy layers alternating. The filling suggests they were used repeatedly and that the ashes were not necessarily cleaned out. In the case of oven L105, a layer of broken pottery, mostly consisting of fragments of amphorae, was laid out, probably to create a new stable and cleaner level (Fig. 7).

5 The analysis was conducted by Essam Ahmed under the supervision of Mennat el-Dorriy.

6 Schiestl 2016, Abb. 3.3.

7 Tomber 2013.



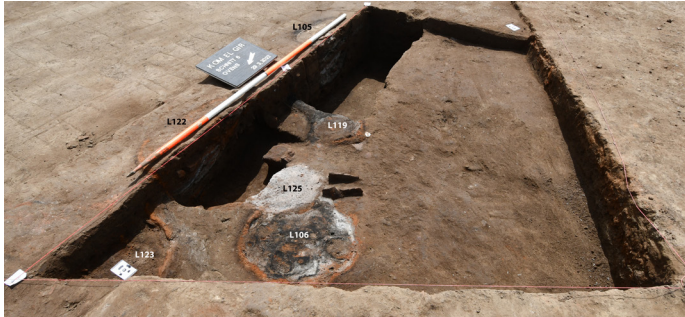


Fig. 6: Group of fireplaces and ovens L105 to L123



Fig. 7: Section through oven L105



Fig. 8: Detail of fireplace L125 with the neck of amphora used as draught hole. Drawing of the neck of the amphora on the right

13 In one case, L125, the ventilation system was preserved. Near the base, a draught hole had been created by using a neck of an amphora (Fig. 8). Similar constructions are frequently documented for Graeco-Roman ovens and fireplaces<sup>8</sup>.

14 While the final archeozoological and botanical studies of the ovens and fireplaces are not yet completed, some preliminary results on the remains of the food found can be presented. Snails, that is, freshwater gastropod molluscs (*pila ovata*), were found in ovens L105, 106 and L122, small animal bones, some most likely from fowl, were found in L106, 108, 119, 122, and 123, and catfish bones were found in L108 and 119<sup>9</sup>. Charred fragments of cereal grains (*Triticum dicoccum*) were identified in the filling of oven L106. In ovens L122 and L119, fragments of charred stones of dates (*Phoenix dactylifera*) were found, and in L119, also fragments of seeds of weeds (*Viciae* and *Phalaris*)<sup>10</sup>. Most of the foodstuff reflects locally available resources in the ancient delta environment. Snails and catfish, for example, were also popular at nearby Buto in Pharaonic times.

## A Ptolemaic »Tannour«

15 In connection with food production, a find in square 10 is worth mentioning, located south of the kitchen area discussed above. A small space had been hacked into the edge of the wall of the monumental structure near the southwestern corner. Into this cave-like space, a large vessel was placed (Fig. 9 and 10). The vessel, 57 cm in height, was intentionally made without a base and may primarily have been intended as an oven, like the *tannour* or *tabouna*, which is still used today for baking flatbread. Notably the oven was initially produced as such. Most other examples known from Egypt of similar function were reused storage jars with cut off bases<sup>11</sup>. The vessel was secondarily filled with numerous smaller pots and fragments of ceramics, which show a good state of preservation (Fig. 11) and

8 Depaetere 2005, 465.

9 The information on the remains of animal bones was kindly provided by Nicolas Morand based on photographs.

10 The analysis was conducted by Essam Ahmed under the supervision of Mennat el-Dorri.

11 Depaetere 2005, 466.



Fig. 9: »Tannour«  
(bread baking oven),  
L133D, used as a  
rubbish dump, *in situ*

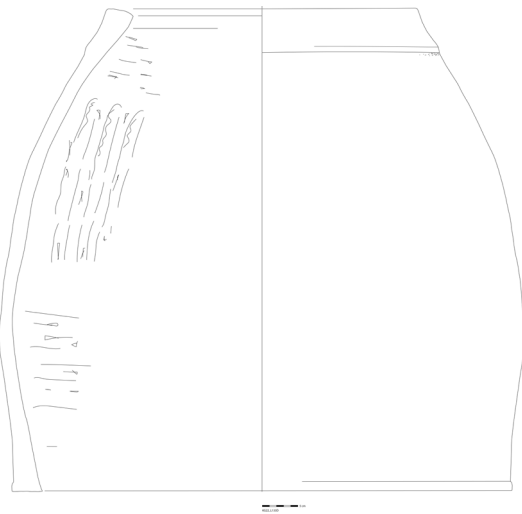


Fig.10: »Tannour«  
(bread baking oven),  
L133D

provide a *terminus ante quem* for the active phase of the oven at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

16 The use of large containers and ovens as rubbish dumps is widespread and documented in numerous examples<sup>12</sup>. The vessel's content is interesting as it represents the – mainly – food processing inventory at the site from later Ptolemaic times (end of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> century BC) and provides an overview of the ceramic inventory at the site of Kom el-Gir. The finds include kitchen wares such as cooking pots (so-called *caccabai*) of different types (Fig. 11.1–2). One of them is completely preserved. The rim fragment of a so-called *marmite à collerette* (Fig. 11.3), a form that is only known in Egypt in Ptolemaic times, was also found. A handmade *brazier/kanoun* (Fig. 11.6) used as stove also forms part of the food-processing inventory. In addition, and directly connected to the bread-making process, various bread moulds (Fig. 11.4–5) were found. Large hand-made basins (Fig. 11.7–8), which have also been found in the context of bread production, may have been used for preparing the dough. Associated with those basins and bowls, small wheel-made slightly ribbed bowls (Fig. 11.11) were part of the dumped material. The extent to which they are related to production processes in general and used as kitchenware is still unclear. Several fragments of storage jars or smaller pots (Fig. 11.9–10) as well as Ptolemaic table wares such as convex (Fig. 11.12) and carinated bowls (Fig. 11.13) and a table amphora (*hydria*) (Fig. 11.14) were found in the same context. Form and fabric resemble the production in Buto, and it seems most likely that they were produced there<sup>13</sup>. However, local production cannot be excluded. The local character of the assemblage at Kom el-Gir is suggested by the large number of amphorae AE 2.3.1 (Fig. 11.15)<sup>14</sup>, which are rarely represented at other sites. Their high number in relation to other types of amphorae from the late Ptolemaic period (end of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC) might indicate local production in Kom el-Gir.

12 Möller 2023, 55.

13 Reimann – Séguier 2022, 112–117.

14 Dixneuf 2011.



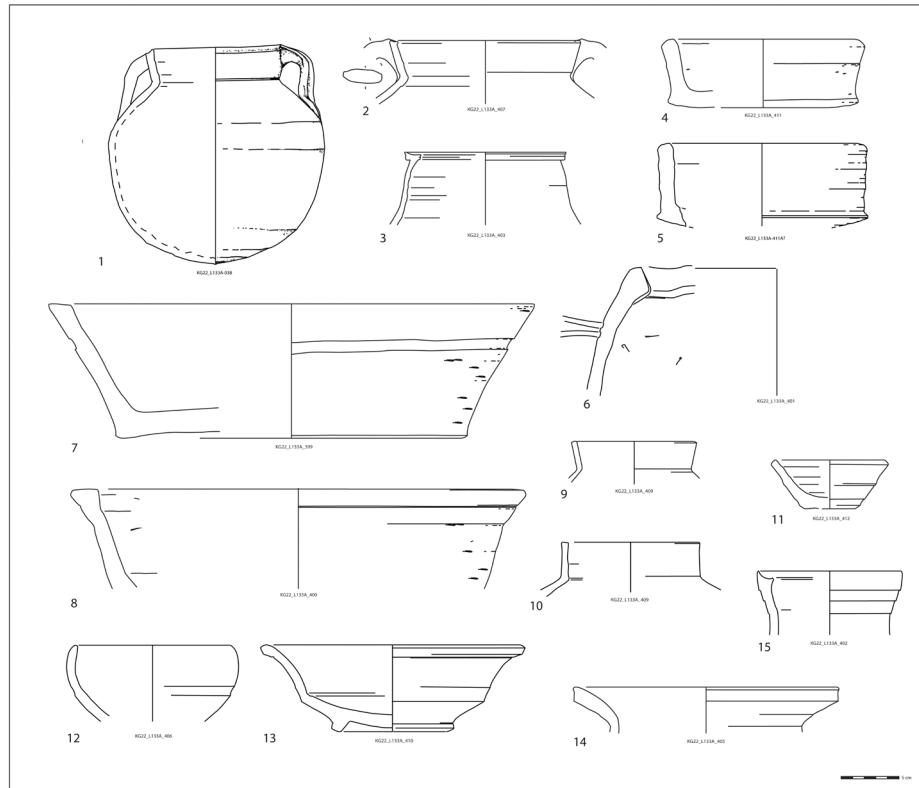


Fig. 11: Vessels found in the »tannour« (bread baking oven), L133D

## Outlook

17 In the upcoming seasons, we hope to gain more information on the monumental structure. When was it built, and what purpose did it serve? This may also help answer the fundamental question of when the settlement of Kom el-Gir was founded. During surveying the surface and auger core drilling on the site, no pre-Ptolemaic material was identified. Thus, for the time being, it appears to be a Ptolemaic foundation. However, this can only be confirmed or refuted once the deepest layers of the settlement have been reached.

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Fig.10: DAI Cairo, Heike Möller

Fig. 11: DAI Cairo, Heike Möller

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