

# Egypt, the Fayum region



One of the lions of the entrance passage discovered in 2009

## The Project of the Egyptian-Italian Cooperation in Medinet Madi

Exciting news for archaeology in Medinet Madi is the completion of an important Cooperation project supported by our Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Direction for Development Cooperation. The scientific and technical direction of the ISSEM project (Egyptian-Italian Environmental Cooperation Program: Institutional Support to Supreme Council of Antiquities for Environmental Monitoring and Management of Cultural Heritage Sites) is entrusted by the University of Pisa's Department of Historical Sciences of the Ancient World and the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA)<sup>1</sup>. The scientific direction is shared by Dr Zahi Hawass, General Secretary of the SCA and Vice Minister of Culture, and Edda Bresciani, Professor Emeritus of Egyptology at the University of Pisa.

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<sup>1</sup> ISSEMM Project December 2009: il parco archeo-naturalistico di Medinet Madi – Wadi EL Rayan, University of Pisa: "IL GIORNALE DELL'ATENEO" and in "ATHENET online" June 2009.

The architect, Antonio Giammarusti, undertook the technical supervision of the project which aimed to excavate a section of the ancient city which measures 20,000 square meters.

The incredible results of the project can be seen in a whole new area being excavated, south of the first discovered summerhouse by Achille Vogliano in the 1930s. A new sacred entrance passage and a temple surrounded with a portico of columns which has been transformed into a traditional summerhouse with additional intercolumned walls, four large lions along the entrance passage, and at the end, a lioness with two cubs, whose realistic features display incredible workmanship. The new entrance passage terminates with steps and ramps that lead to an altar. There are also three Greek dedicatory inscriptions. In total the passage of Narmouthis measures 230m long with a width of 7m, and leads from the Isis portal until the altar for the tombs.

Begun in the 1990s by the archaeological mission of the University of Pisa, the topographical and architectural surveys are now completed. Currently work is being finalised for the restoration and protection of the mud-brick and stone buildings as the initial materials used by the ancient builders were of poor quality.

Another important element of the project and the study of the Fayum, was the inclusion of the archaeological site of Medinet Madi in the protected nature reserve of Wadi El Rayan. Meanwhile a track of 22 km which connects to the desert, has been extended to the archaeological site.

The final activity, including the GIS coverage of the Fayum, will culminate with the official presentation of the results of the project in early 2011.

Thanks to ISSEM Project of the Egyptian-Italian Cooperation, the area of Medinet Madi will be the first archaeological park of Egypt and will certainly be an important factor for sustainable tourism and socio-economic development of the Fayum.

## HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION TO ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF MEDINET MADI

The temple of Medinet Madi was unearthed from 1935 to 1939 by Achille Vogliano who originates from Milan. It is the only temple of worship in the Middle Kingdom (II millennium BC) preserved in Egypt, complete with texts and sculptures. The rulers of the Middle Kingdom wished to increase the agricultural resources of the Fayum and so the Pharaoh Amenemete III constructed the small temple along with a village called Gia. The temple was dedicated, in addition to Sobek, Renenut, the Cobra Goddess, Lord of the Harvest and Barns and Protectress of the Pharaoh, who was later combined in the Late Period with the goddess Isis, known as Isis-Thermutis. The name of the goddess gave birth to the toponym Narmuthis "The city of Renenut" which was in use during the Greco-Roman era.

The founder Amenemete III and his successor Amenemete IV are represented in beautiful reliefs on the walls of the temple, which includes a hypostyle hall with two columns and a transverse room with three cells. The original temple was restored and expanded to the south and north during the Tolemaic era. Probably during the reign of Tolemy II, three yards, a vestibule and another temple resting on the north side, were added, which were all surrounded by a thick, high wall of mud-brick with a large portal to the south and north. Inscribed on the doorposts of the first court, Achille Vogliano discovered four hymns in Greek composed around the end of the first century BC by Isidore, a Greek-Egyptian, in honor of Isis-Thermutis and the founder of the temple, Amenemete III.

From the vestibule of the temple a long dromos, or processional route, lined with sphinxes leads to the south to a monumental summerhouse. The area beyond the secondary north portal was changed in Roman times with the addition of a large arched square (50 x 30 meters), which is of significant archaeological interest.

The collaboration of archaeological missions with the University of Messina-Chair of Papyrology, from 1997-2004, led to the discovery, on the hill overlooking the temple complex discovered by Vogliano, a new Ptolemaic temple called Temple C. The building, dedicated to the worship of two crocodiles, measuring 16.50 x 12 meters, is orientated east to west and is built of mud-brick with architectural elements in limestone. A structure connected with the temple provided the most remarkable discovery: a room with a barrel vault, integrated, was used for the incubation of crocodile eggs and livestock, and a gradiated tank stored the sacred crocodile to be killed, mummified and then sold to pilgrims devoted to Sobek.

Simultaneously with the excavation of the Temple C, the archaeological missions of the period from 2000 to 2004 were devoted to excavation and restoration of the south neighborhood of the temple. Here, a group of buildings were erected on the hillside which overlook the route to the temple. The road to the temple is characterized by large circles preceded by pillars and decorated with wall paintings, typologically similar to the second Pompeian style, dating from the II-III century AD. All buildings in this area were accessible from an outside staircase and were equipped with barrel-vaulted cellars.

Not all buildings excavated should be construed as private homes, but rather as places of religious gathering, some as archives or libraries. Excavations have unearthed fragments of Greek and demotic texts, dishes of various shapes and types, numerous fragments of glass and faience vases and a beautiful terracotta male head.

The area of the temple with its appendages is without doubt the most significant part of Medinet Madi. However the research of the Pisan Mission has expanded into other sectors of the archaeological site, particularly the area to the south-eastern slopes of the hill of the temple, occupied by a village of the late Roman and Coptic periods (III-VII AD). The area has been explored systematically during the years of 1984-1990 and the Mission has discovered and identified ten churches from the period of V-VI AD with a basilica plan, some of which are impressive in size and rich in sculptures. Among the artifacts found during excavations are pages of Coptic code dated from VI AD.

In 2006-2007 there was the important discovery of the Roman castrum Narmuthis, dating from the Diocletian period (late III AD), named in the Notitia Dignitatum. The castrum Narmuthis is the only military camp of the Fayum, in addition to one already known at Qasr Qarun.

Built of mud-brick, the castrum is square in shape (50 x 50 meters) and the 3.8 meter thick walls are reinforced by four towers at the corners, and a round tower at the center of the west wall. The castrum has two entrances, one main northern portal and a secondary to the south. In the center of the camp are the remains of the barracks that housed the military Cohors Numidarum IV.

Inside the castrum, in the adjacent southern entrance, a large tank (3.35 meters) was identified and excavated. Cut in the rock and closed by a vaulted roof burnt bricks, the tank was intended to supply water to the whole camp. The reservoir was supplied by a complex system of pipes that connect to the water system and supplied water to the village and

surrounding agricultural land. Even the hydraulic system has been studied and published.

*Bibliography*

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