

Shokan. Revival of a forgotten village

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Figure 1. The Shokan excavation team at work in Building B1 (photo Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden).

Introduction

The Dutch National Museum of Antiquities (RMO) in Leiden has been active in the necropolis of Saqqara for 45 years during which time several spectacular discoveries were made. Before the RMO excavated in Saqqara in cooperation with the Egypt Exploration Society, the museum excavated at Abu Roasch and in Nubia. During the successive winters of 1962 and 1963 a team from the RMO and the University of Leiden, led by the then director of the museum Professor Dr Adolf Klasens, excavated the Meroitic village of Ash-Shaukan (Shokan, Figure 1) and an early Christian village, Abdallah Nirqi. The villages were found quite close to each other, both located a few kilometres north of Abu Simbel.

In Shokan the team excavated c. 30 late Meroitic house structures (Figure 2). Documentation of this excavation was stored in the archives of the museum some 54 years ago, and has never been studied, nor, except for a single article, published. This contrasts with the excavation of the church of Abdallah Nirqi, of which the complete findings were published in 1975 (Van Moorsel *et al.* 1975). With the construction of new dams in the Nile, it is time to take Shokan out of oblivion.

Dutch Excavations in Nubia

The construction of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s meant that many monuments in Lower Nubia were going to disappear under the rising waters. Faced with these problems, the governments of both the United Arab Republic of Egypt and the Republic of the Sudan requested the assistance of UNESCO in an appeal for international action to protect the endangered monuments that were likely to be submerged as a result of the construction of the dam. This appeal formed the base for the World Heritage Convention (1972), out of which, among others, the World Heritage List originated. More than 50 countries participated in the UNESCO campaign, which also led to the relocation of the temples of Abu Simbel among several others. One of those temples, the one from the northern plain of Taffeh, is now located in the RMO in Leiden.



Figure 2. Overview of the excavation of Buildings B5 and B19. Abu Simbel is visible in the background cliffs (photo Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden).

village to the Meroitic period (c. 300 BC-AD 350) and thought it was occupied until at least the X-Group period (AD 350-550) or perhaps somewhat later (Smith 1962, 41). This conclusion was supported later by the Dutch Mission. Adolf Klasens, director of the RMO from 1959 until 1979, played an important role in the campaign. Not only was he a member of the Executive Committee of UNESCO, he was also the field director during the Dutch excavations that were carried out as part of the UNESCO rescue operation in Shokan and Abdallah Nirqi. Klasens started a tradition of Dutch fieldwork in Egypt that continues to this day. Klasens' tutor was one of the most prominent archaeologists of his time: the English Egyptologist Walter Emery, who had already established in the 1930s that there were remnants of ancient settlements in the vicinity of Abu Simbel. With this knowledge, the experience gained at Abu Roasch and the financial support of the Dutch Organisation for Pure Scientific Research (ZWO), the forerunner of the current NWO,¹ Klasens started the excavation of the Shokan settlement. His team consisted of the American Egyptologist and pottery expert Helen Jacquet-Gordon, the Swiss architect-archaeologist Jean Jacquet, the photographer of the RMO Frits van Veen, and the students Dick van der Kooij (first season), Servaas Wildschut (second season) and Hans Schneider (first and second season).

After the second excavation season the team did not return. Instead, prompted by the fear of losing the site to the rising water, the excavation in Abdallah Nirqi was taken up by a team from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in the summer of 1964 under the direction of Professor Dr László Castiglione.

Professor Klasens wrote two short reports about the excavation of Shokan (Klasens 1963, 57-66; 1964, 147-156). Articles by Jean Jacquet and Helen Jacquet-Gordon (Jacquet 1971; Jacquet-Gordon 2000) appeared on the architecture of the settlement and the discovered ostraca. In his book about the temple of Taffeh, Hans Schneider also included a chapter on Shokan (Schneider 1979, 46-52). Other projects, such as the arrival and reconstruction of the Taffeh temple in the museum and the later excavations in Saqqara, kept the RMO staff busy so that a closer examination of Shokan's findings was a low priority.

Whilst most of the excavation finds ended up in the museum's storerooms, a few objects did find their way to the exhibition halls. Some of them can be admired in the permanent display of the Egyptian collection, refurbished in 2016.

Excavation Archives

Documents about Shokan are stored in the archives of the RMO. Among others, the archives contain the floor plans, object registers, excavation photographs, drawings and notes from the excavators. This documentation gives an idea

¹ Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek.

of how the Dutch team excavated Shokan.

During the first excavation season, Klasens made a map of the site (Figure 3). This map, which is stored in the archives, shows the different types of structures found in Shokan. However, it must be kept in mind that on this map no distinction was made between the different levels of occupation found in Shokan. Unfortunately, this is also the only map of the site. It is almost certain that a more updated copy must have been made; however, its absence from the archives forces us to assume that this updated map, along with other documentation, was lost during a theft in the 1960s (pers. comm. with Hans Schneider).

Research

In Nubian archaeology a completely excavated Meroitic settlement is rare, and until six decades ago, both archaeologists and Egyptologists alike were more interested in temples and cemeteries than in villages. According to researchers at the time, cemeteries provided more information about the past than the remains of houses. Partly because of this, less is known about the lives of the inhabitants of settlements in the Meroitic period than about their death. Examples of sites with (partially) excavated villages are Meinarti, Wadi el-Arab, Arminna West and Argin.

Nubian settlements such as Shokan are important because they provide more insight into the administrative organisation of late Meroitic Lower Nubia. The existing picture is strongly based on findings from the larger regional centres such as Qasr Ibrim, Pselchis, Karanog, Gebel Adda and Faras. Many of these centres, like Shokan, disappeared into Lake Nasser/Lake Nubia between 1964 and 1971. Only Qasr Ibrim has been spared because of its location on a high plateau. The excavation results from Qasr Ibrim (Egypt Exploration Society) and other (older) excavation projects are valuable when it comes to interpreting the role of Shokan, such as when interpreting the lack of monumental or specifically religious buildings at the site. The objects found in Shokan can contribute to a better understanding of life in a Meroitic village. Finds such as sherds, beads, terracotta figures, textile implements and oil lamps provide valuable information about the socio-economic situation in the village.

Furthermore, the RMO archives contain a lot of information about the pottery, which accounts for 80% of the excavated objects. The excavators have recorded where most of the pottery was found; however, the stratigraphic position of the objects was not recorded. Hopefully, the photographs taken during the excavation can help determine a more precise location, as some objects were photographed *in situ*. This makes them potentially useful as chronological markers for the dating of structures and other objects on the site. Recently, renewed research into the oil lamp fragments and textile implements of Shokan has begun. The following sections briefly present the preliminary results of these studies.

Lamps from Shokan

One of the most interesting and telling household items is perhaps the oil lamp. Already in use in Egypt in the dynastic period and mass-produced in Roman times, this type of object indicates that even after sunset people had tasks to perform and thus required light. The excavators of Shokan only found a total of eight lamps or lamp fragments. Found scattered across the village with c. 30 buildings or houses, this seems an exceedingly small number. Did the villagers take their lamps with them when they abandoned Shokan? Or were lamps simply a luxury item and not available to all inhabitants? Perhaps not all fragments were recognised or even found in the field. It needs to be kept in mind that the material discussed here is an archaeological selection but may well have been a selection left by the inhabitants of Shokan. Perhaps the continued study of the pottery material from the site will result in the identification of more lamp fragments.

Preliminary analysis of the identified lamp fragments yields interesting results. Of the fragments found, half are consistent with types known from Graeco-Roman Egypt. In total three different types of oil lamps were found in Shokan. The most recognisable type is the frog lamp. This type is generally dated to AD 200-400 and supports the dating of Shokan by the excavators. Interestingly, one of the frog lamps (F1964/8.80) is much larger than most lamps of this type.² Was this lamp meant to burn longer? The second type found in Shokan is the so-called *Bildlamp* (Loeschcke 1919, 23-66). This lamp is clearly identifiable because of the scene or symbols depicted on the 'medallion'

² See among others Bailey 1988, 263 Q2167-2177.

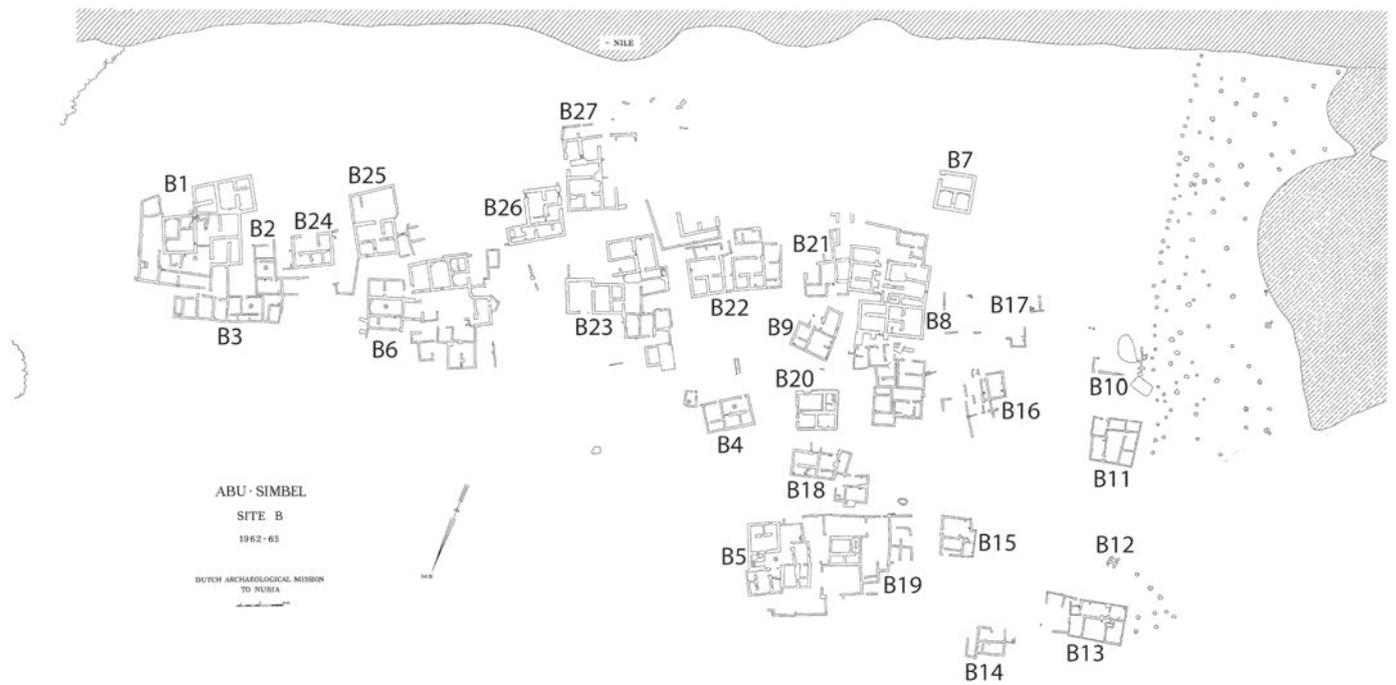


Figure 3. Modified from the map of Shokan (drawn by Professor Dr A. J. Klasens in 1963).

(the decorated upper part containing the hole through which the lamp was filled with oil). The two *Bildlamp* fragments found in Shokan were intensively used, as the soot testifies, and both come from Shokan buildings that were used over a long period of time: Buildings B1 and B8. The fragments can be dated to AD 0-300. The first *Bildlamp* fragment could be an Alexandrian copy of a Roman lamp or even an object imported from outside Egypt. This fragment has a scene featuring a cupid on the medallion. These were common depictions on lamps and parallels are known of cupids riding a goat or simple standing cupids.³ The second *Bildlamp* fragment shows a cupid feeding a stork or heron (Figure 4). In Roman times the stork was a reference to *pietas*. These two *Bildlamp* fragments, whether imported or made in Egypt, may imply a certain familiarity with Graeco-Roman iconography and mythology by the people of Shokan. The third type of lamp found at Shokan is perhaps the most interesting as it does not feature in the main lamp typologies of the Mediterranean area. It comprises four nearly similar lamps of simple manufacture and without any decoration. These lamps consist of a wheel-made body, possibly made in one piece on the potter's wheel or with a separately made top (medallion), a simple nozzle and an almost vertical, separately made, handle. This group of four lamps can be subdivided into two types based on the shoulder and the medallion: Shokan Type 1 has an upward curving medallion and Shokan Type 2 has a horizontal medallion. These lamps seem to be of a local or perhaps Meroitic manufacture.⁴ Three of these lamp fragments were found relatively close together in rooms of Buildings B1 and B2. Fragment F 1964/8.131?⁵ is the most interesting, as it was found in a room of a building that has only one apparent occupation phase (Building B22 Room 7). This fragment was discovered in a room with two ovens that was located in between two sets of rooms with thicker walls and a vaulted roof (Figure 5) (Edwards 1996, 64). Was the room with the ovens in Building B22 the location for food preparation for multiple houses or households? Or was it perhaps meant for food preparation for an extended household? The findspot of the lamp, if still *in situ* when excavated, seems logical, as among other factors the need to make fire for cooking would have been much easier with a lamp at the ready.

Further study of the Shokan lamp fragments is taking place, but already they are an indication that the people living in Shokan during the different occupation phases were using lamps of local origin as well as lamps coming from or via Graeco-Roman Egypt. The finds illustrate that although Shokan might have been a small village, its villagers were knowledgeable of products from elsewhere.

³I.e. Hayes 1980, 110 number 438 (Cupid on a goat) and 115, number 462 (standing Cupid). Dated to AD 100-300. These fit with Bailey's dating (Bailey 1988, 249). See also Mlynarczyk 1995, 149 number I.16.

⁴No known parallels in Graeco-Roman lamp studies have been identified.

⁵The question mark is part of the museum inventory number.



Figure 4. Oil lamp, RMO F1964/5.105 (photo Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden).

The Evidence for Spinning and Weaving in Shokan

The research into the textile implements took place in October and November 2019. These implements are currently either in the museum's storerooms or in the permanent Egypt exhibition of the museum. The corpus includes spindle whorls, pin-beaters and loom weights. Unfortunately, no (parts of) looms, pieces of fabric or yarns have been found. Since the excavators suspected that Shokan had been voluntarily abandoned - perhaps because they were in danger of losing the battle against the advancing desert sands - items such as the aforementioned have been, in all probability, taken along or did not survive the weathering of time.

In the database of the RMO, 14 spindle whorls from Shokan are listed. This is also the number mentioned in the notebooks of

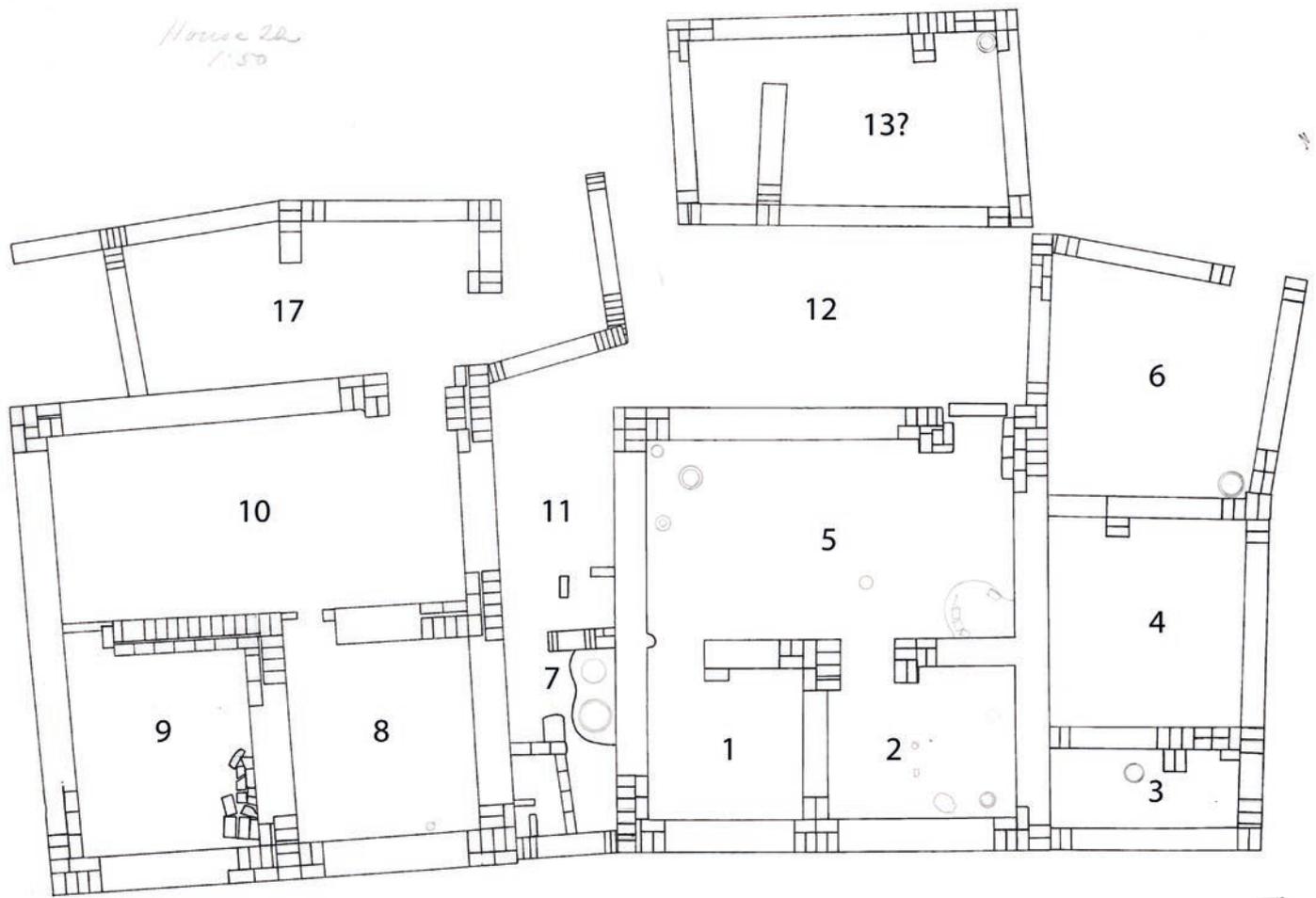


Figure 5. Modified after house plan of building B22. The set of three rooms in the lower left corner (8-10) show traces of vaulting. Immediately to the right of this set is a small room (7) with two ovens where a lamp fragment was found (photo Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden).

Jacquet-Gordon.⁶ This number indicates that all spindle whorls found on the site were also brought to the museum in Leiden. The spindle whorls were found scattered over the site in different housing complexes. Five of the Shokan spindle whorls are extremely light and weigh between 3 and 5g. According to Mårtensson *et al.* (2009, 373) extremely thin threads of 0.3mm or of similar thickness could be spun with whorls as light as these. Three spindle whorls are slightly heavier and weigh between 7 and 9g. A spindle whorl of c. 8g could, in accordance with Mårtensson *et al.*, yield a thread of 0.3-0.4mm. Of the six remaining spindle whorls, the weight of five are known. These are the heaviest whorls of the corpus. However, they are under 18g which is needed to produce a thread of 0.4-0.6 mm. From this it can be concluded that it would not be possible to use these whorls to spin a thread much thicker than the aforementioned 0.4mm. Judging by the small and light spindle whorls, it is obvious that at least thin threads were spun in Shokan. Spindle whorls were discovered in the following buildings: B1, B2, B3, B5, B8, B13, B18 and B22. A concentration of spindle whorls was not found. The only room worth mentioning is B18/1 where three whorls were found together, all affected by fire. Another whorl, found in the same building, but in another room (B18/8) has no fire damage. It follows that the fire apparently did not destroy the entire building.

The excavators called the small, straight or curved, pointed, bone objects found in Shokan ‘shuttles’. Nowadays it is assumed that the pointed bone objects⁷ served to help the weaver to push the weft down (or up on a warp-weighted loom) between pairs of warp yarns, and also to arrange the warp yarns and clear the shed. The thin pointed tool is also useful when it is necessary to pick out individual warp yarns (Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 358). In the current literature these objects are called ‘pin-beaters’, a term that will be used here as well. The excavation team found 35 pin-beaters in total, of which 33 are currently in the museum storeroom (Figures 6 and 7). Of the two missing pin-beaters, one is in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.⁸ The other one is not to be found in the Shokan Album of Antiquities and only mentioned in Jacquet-Gordon’s field notebook.⁹ Pin-beaters were found in the following buildings: B1, B3, B5, B8, B9, B15, B16, B18, B19, B22 and on the surface near Building B2. The only room worth mentioning is Room 10 in Building B5 that yielded three pin-beaters. All Shokan pin-beaters presently in the RMO have one side of the tip removed to form a sharp point, so they can press down the threads in the fabric on the loom very accurately. The excavated pin-beaters have a length between 113.5 and 52mm with an average of c. 68.6mm and their average weight is 7.1g. Pin-beaters are not an essential tool for the weaver. Without them, the weaver is perfectly capable of weaving a piece of cloth; however, he or she needs to have agile fingers (Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001, 358). In addition, Petrie stated in 1890 that the comparable objects he encountered in the excavation of Gurob were used in net making (Petrie 1890, 34). This, too, offers a plausible explanation for the use of these bone implements.

In Shokan, the Dutch mission also found 651 loom weights, 139 parts of loom weights and 164 pieces belonging to an unknown number of loom weights. They brought only 19 of the complete loom weights back to Leiden. All of these were discovered in the first excavation season. The 19 loom weights, all made of brownish-grey unfired Nile clay, weigh between 87-957g, with an average weight of 491.5g. The average length is 124.5mm. The heaviest loom



Figure 6. Pin-beater, RMO F1964/8.111.

Photo Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden.



Figure 7. Pin-beater, RMO F1964/8.111.

Photo Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden.

⁶Jacquet-Gordon’s notebooks, Shokan Archives, 1962-1964 Box C134.

⁷According to Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood (2001, 358) pin-beaters could also be made of polished wood, iron or gazelle horn. However, in Shokan the excavation team only found pin-beaters of animal bone.

⁸Album of Antiquities 1962-63, Shokan Archives, 1962-1964 Box C136A, 8.2.2b/15h, 12.

⁹Shokan Archives, 1962-1964 Box C134, 8.2.2b/15c, Building B13, Room 9.

weight weighs 957g with a length of 184mm, whilst the lightest one weighs 87g. The smallest loom weight found was F1964/5.121 with a weight of only 4g more than the lightest of the 19 weights brought back from Shokan. The distribution of loom weights found in Shokan indicates a concentration in Buildings B1, B8, B13 and B19. Building B1 Room 4 is noteworthy with eight complete loom weights and 23 parts of loom weights. This means that in total 31 loom weights were discovered in this room. Building B8 shows a concentration in Room 25 where the team discovered 31 loom weights and part of one, and even more so in Room 33 with 41 loom weights and parts of two. Furthermore, Room 1 in building B13 yielded 20 loom weights and part of another, in Room 2, 19 loom weights and parts of three more were discovered. Building B19 had a large number of loom weights, especially in Room 1, namely 20 loom weights and part of another, and Room 8 contained 15 loom weights and part of one more. Apart from the aforementioned buildings, a large number of loom weights was found in Building B3, in Room 16 and in Building B5, in Room 13.

The discovery of spindle whorls and loom weights together form clear indicators of the location and scale of textile activities such as spinning and weaving (Yvanez 2018, 82). What this could mean for the textile production in Shokan will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent article.

Unfortunately, it is not clear from which of the three habitation layers of Shokan each item originates.¹⁰ The excavation team noted in the 1960s that during the second habitation period Shokan was most intensively inhabited (Klasens 1963, 63), but did this necessarily mean that all of the objects found were from this habitation layer? A continued study of the lamps, textile implements, and the other objects, as well as the archival documents will lead to a reconstruction of the excavation, but also to a better understanding of the site and the people that inhabited it.

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¹⁰ See among others Mann and van den Bercken 2018.