

The Catacombs of Anubis at North Saqqara: A Subterranean World of Canids

Paul T. Nicholson explores the labyrinthine burial site for millions of dog mummies.

Today the site of Saqqara is perhaps best known for two monuments: the Third Dynasty Step Pyramid of Djoser (c. 2667-2648 BC) and the Serapeum, burial place of the Apis bulls. It was the discovery of the Serapeum in 1851 by Auguste Mariette (1821-1881) which really brought Egyptology and Saqqara into the consciousness of the public (*see map, opposite*).

The Apis bull is known to have been interred at Saqqara from the First Dynasty onwards, although the Serapeum we currently know begins only in the New Kingdom. However, the Apis was only the first of many sacred animals which came to be interred at Saqqara. There is in fact a connection between the animals, the Step Pyramid and the rediscovery of the sacred animal cults of Saqqara.

Djoser, Imhotep and Professor Emery

The connection between the animal cults and the Step Pyramid comes via Imhotep, chief advisor to Djoser and the architect of the Step Pyramid. His titles, as given on a statue base, describe him as "The Chancellor of the King of Lower Egypt, the first after the King of Upper Egypt, Administrator of the Great Palace, hereditary lord, Greatest of Seers, Imhotep, the builder, the sculptor, the maker of stone vases." Clearly this individual was of great prominence in Djoser's court and the construction of the Step Pyramid sealed his reputation, not only in his time but well beyond it.

Imhotep came to be regarded as the inventor of stone building and as a wise individual. As a result, over time,

he became associated with Thoth, god of wisdom, writing and learning, and with Ptah, creator god of Memphis and patron of craftsmen. Imhotep had become a demi-god.

The Apis was the living image (*ba*) of Ptah, whilst Thoth was represented by the ibis and the baboon, making a clear connection between animal cults and the deified Imhotep.

However, despite the fame of both the Step Pyramid and Imhotep himself, the location of his burial place was unknown in modern times and it was the hope of discovering it that led Professor W. B. Emery (1903-1971) to begin a search for the tomb in the 1960s. This is not the place to go into his many discoveries; suffice to say that although his work did not uncover the Tomb of Imhotep, he did discover two burial catacombs for ibises, one for falcons, one for baboons and the catacomb for the burials of the mothers of the Apis bulls. His work did much to reinvigorate interest in Saqqara and provided a great deal of information on the animal cults in what became known as the Sacred Animal Necropolis (S.A.N.) at North Saqqara.

Emery's work would doubtless have yielded still greater things had he not died suddenly in 1971 while working at the site. In the following years Professors Geoffrey Martin and Harry Smith

brought most of Emery's work at the S.A.N. to publication, but the North Ibis Catacomb, newly discovered at the time of Emery's death, was not further investigated until the 1990s (it is currently being written up by me) and several other catacombs, beyond Emery's focus, were not considered.



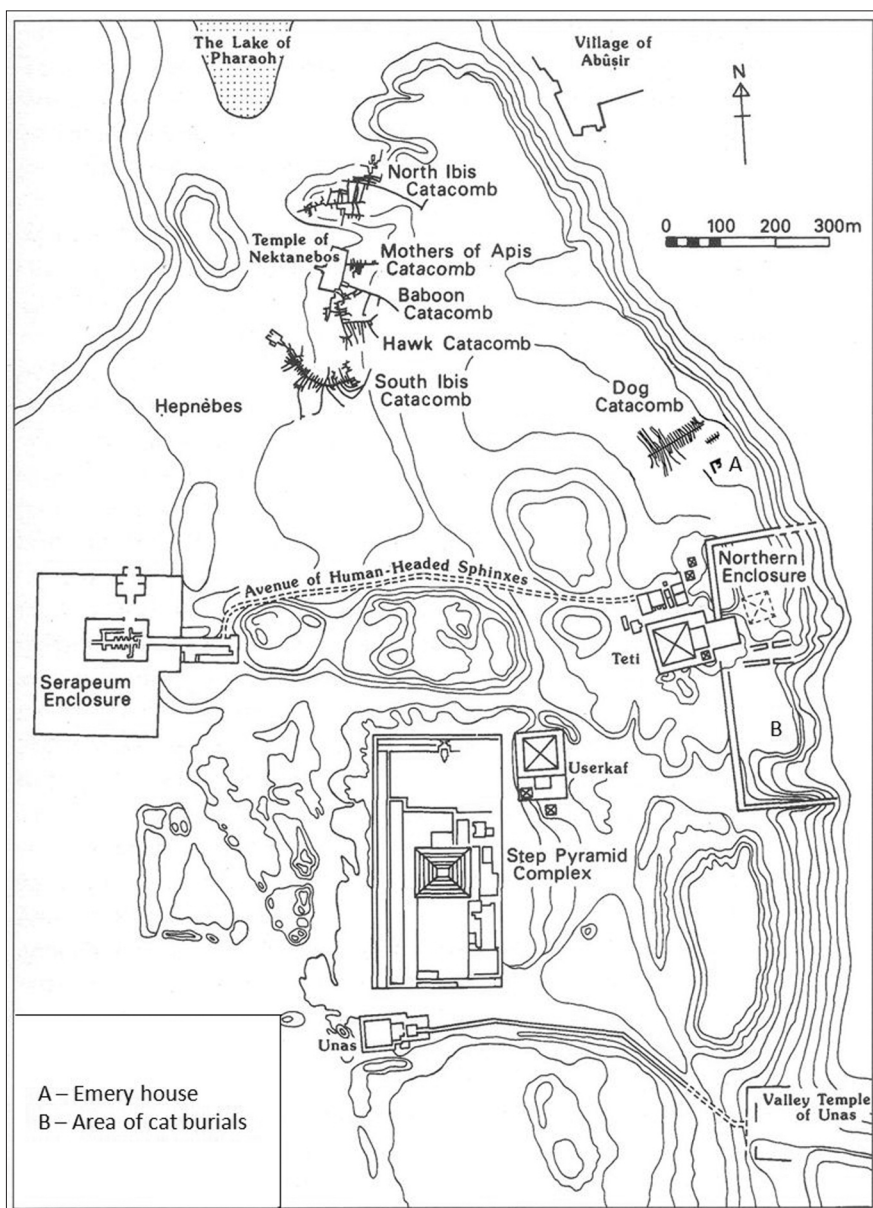
ABOVE: The author photographing a dog mummy in the catacombs.
Photo: Salima Ikram



The Catacombs of Anubis

Emery's discoveries were on the west side of the Saqqara Plateau, as is the Serapeum. However, there are other animal burial places on the east side. These had not been investigated by Emery; he reasoned that Imhotep's tomb probably lay amongst others of the Third Dynasty and that it may well have been close to the burial places of the ibises – hence his concentration on the west side of the plateau.

However, on the east side are two enormous temples, now very ruined. One, the Bubastieion, is dedicated to Bastet, and



TOP LEFT: An unprovenanced dog mummy dated to the Roman Period. The elaborate wrapping suggest that it is not from Saqqara. Boston Museum of Fine Arts accession number 72.4929.

TOP RIGHT: A sketch map of North Saqqara showing the location of the various animal catacombs.
Drawing: Joann Hodges

RIGHT: Dr. Steve Mills surveying on the surface just above the dog catacomb entrance. The Step Pyramid is visible in the distance.



ABOVE

The Anubieion Temple today is largely destroyed or obscured at its surface.

BELOW

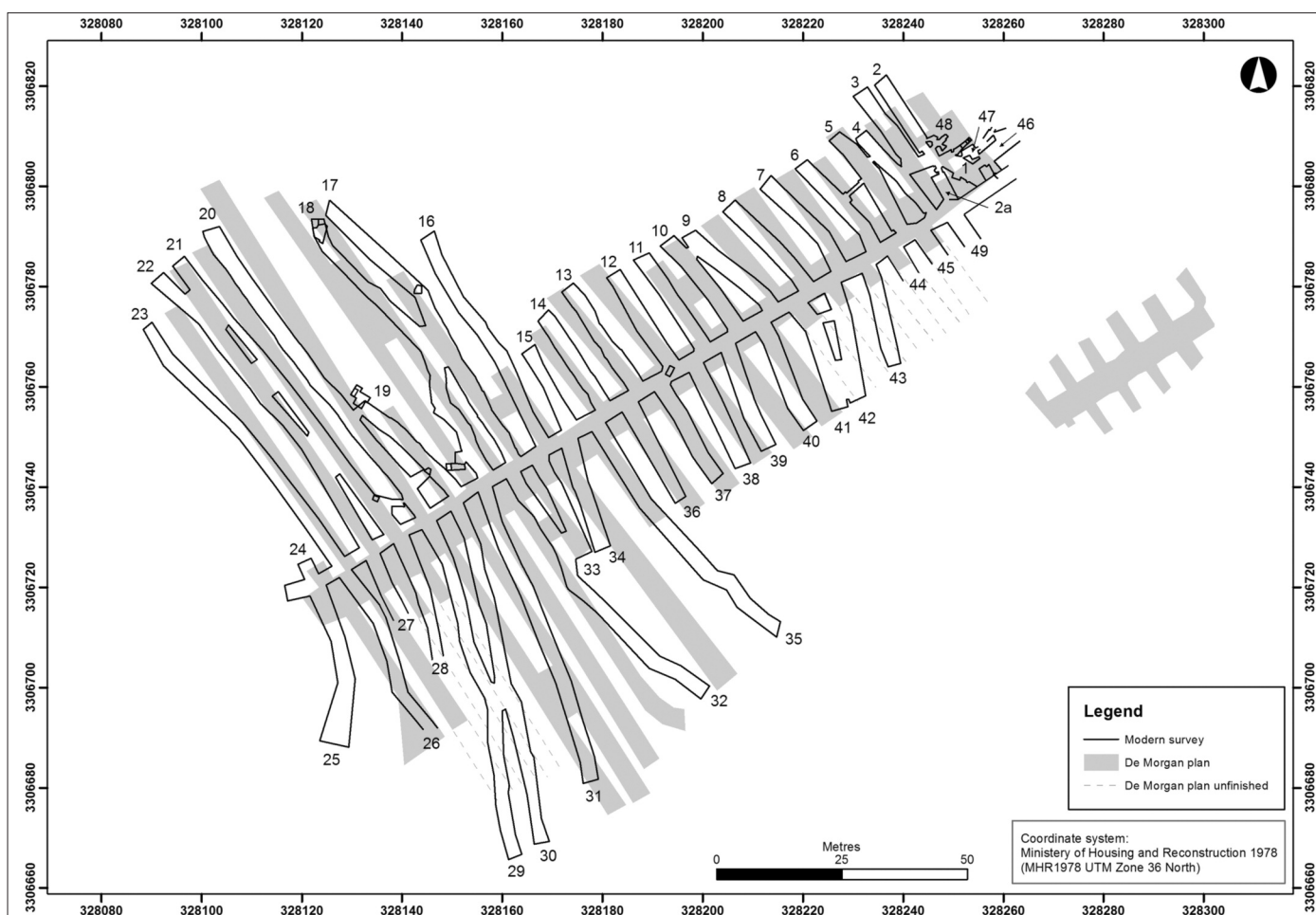
Plan of the larger of the two Dog Catacombs at Saqqara. The grey-shaded area shows the plan as originally made by de Morgan with the modern survey overlaid.

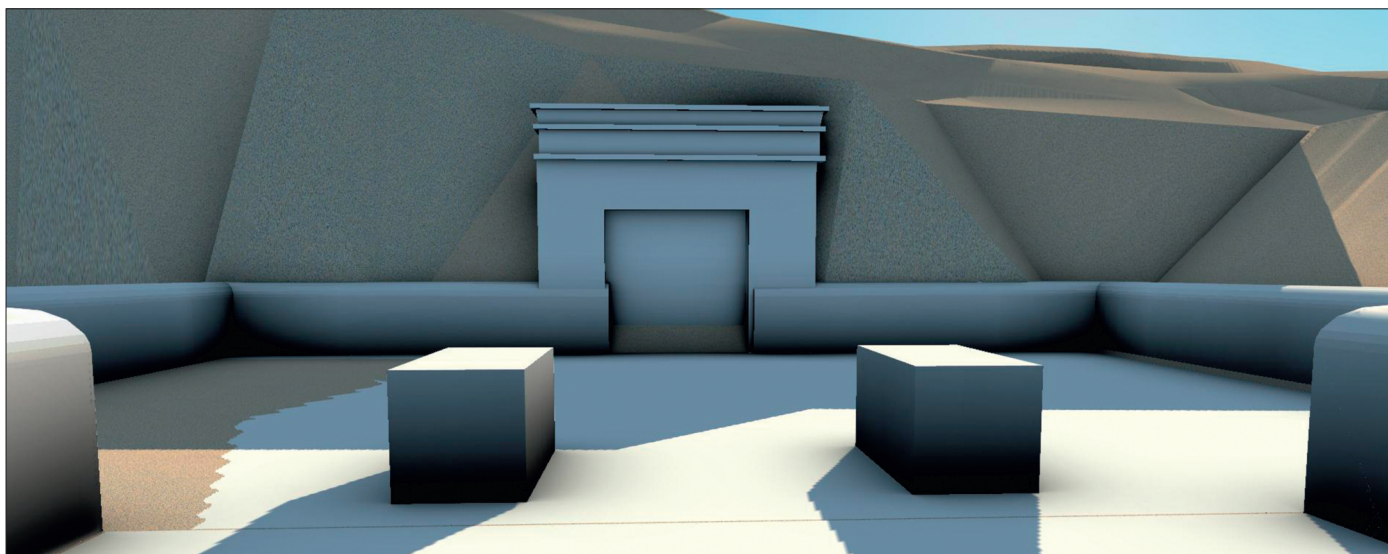
Plan: Steve Mills and Scott Williams

associated with the cat burials which have been investigated by Professor Alain Zivie and his team; the other temple – the Anubieion (*ruins shown above*) – is sacred to Anubis and may have served as the main entry point to Saqqara from the Late Period (c. 747-332 BC) onward. Whilst the cat burials were made in re-used New Kingdom tombs, the burials of the dogs sacred to Anubis were made in dedicated catacombs a little to the north of the Anubieion temple.

It is not known who discovered these catacombs of mummified dogs. They first come to note on a map of the Saqqara necropolis published by Jacques de Morgan (1857-1924) in 1897. They are shown there, to a very small scale, located just a few metres from where Professor Emery's dig house was later constructed. De Morgan gives no details of the catacombs other than to suggest in his colour key that they might belong to the New Kingdom.

I first became aware of the existence of the catacombs when I began working with Professor Smith and Dr. David Jeffreys in the 1980s. The proximity of the catacombs to the Emery house (which was still being used by the expedition) was well known, as was the poor condition of the ground in that area. It is thought that the smaller of the two dog catacombs may well have partially collapsed. Thanks to the generosity of our Egyptian colleagues in the Supreme Council for Antiquities at Saqqara, I first visited the larger of the dog catacombs in December 1995 and was surprised to find it in much better condition than expected.





The Catacombs of Anubis Project

Having had the opportunity to visit the largest of the two dog catacombs identified on de Morgan's map and do some reading around the topic, I realised just how little was really known about the monuments and in 2009 the *Catacombs of Anubis Project* was set up to investigate the catacomb. The team included my colleagues Dr. Steve Mills and Professor Salima Ikram, in charge of surveying and faunal analysis respectively, and this article owes much to their work and to that of the other team members.

The first step was to ensure that the catacomb was safe to work in. The de Morgan plan showed some of the galleries with dotted lines, which suggested that they might have collapsed. This proved to be the case and under the guidance first of geologist Ying Qin, and subsequently Civil Engineer Professor John Harrison, we determined which areas of the catacomb were safe. Happily most of the monument proved to be largely stable so we made as few changes within the monument as possible, avoiding any potentially damaging construction work.

Having put various safety measures in place, work began by making a new survey of the site. This might seem an unnecessary move given that we already had the de Morgan plan. However, that plan is on such a tiny scale that individual features within the catacomb cannot be seen and it would not allow us to attempt any kind of phasing of the monument. Similarly, with modern laser surveying technology we hoped to produce a more accurate plan (*completed plan shown opposite*).



TOP: A reconstruction of the entrance to the Catacombs of Anubis.
Image: Scott Williams

CENTRE: View along the axial corridor of the Dog Catacomb. The burial tunnels opening to left and right can clearly be seen.

BOTTOM: Looking along Gallery 36 showing niches in the walls. The gallery has been cleared of mummies in the past.



ABOVE LEFT

The faunal team, led by Professor Salima Ikram (centre) with Ariel Singer (left) and Dr. Louise Bertini (right) working on bones from the catacomb.

ABOVE RIGHT

A limestone sarcophagus for a falcon mummy in the Falcon Catacomb.

BELOW

Drs. Hendrikje Nouwens examines the remains of a coffin and dog mummy in niche 5B of the Dog Catacomb.



Alongside the surveying work, led by Dr. Mills, Professor Ikram and her team (*seen above*) began work on the faunal remains.

Niche Burials

It was apparent that some of the same features found in the Ibis and Falcon Catacombs were replicated in the Dog Catacomb. For example, there was a series of wall niches, which had been used for burials that were in some way special. The ibises and falcons were usually buried in sealed pottery jars stacked up in the side galleries of their catacomb, but a few special birds were given limestone sarcophagi (*see top right*) which sometimes included a wooden coffin. Many of these sarcophagi were in niches along the walls of the axial corridor



running through the monument. In the case of the dogs, the niches lined many of the burial tunnels as well as the axial aisle, and the 'special' animals were placed in the niches simply as mummies or occasionally in wooden coffins (*see below left*). No stone sarcophagi were found. The niches were then sealed up with a blocking slab made from the same soft limestone as the catacomb itself, making sealed niches very difficult to spot – especially in the darkness of the tomb. The niches in the burial tunnels, and possibly those in the axial corridor too, would ultimately have disappeared beneath the pile of 'common' burials which would have been about 1·10m deep (*see opposite, top*).

It is not clear what the criterion for a niche burial was. It may be that these were animals that had formed part of the 'temple pack' and had lived at the Anubieion, so had special status; or it may be that they were animals which had been dedicated by persons of some wealth who had paid for more elaborate burials. This brings us to the question of how these cults operated.

Animal Cults

Whilst there was only one Apis bull alive at any one time, which was buried with royal honours, the majority of the animal cults formed an aspect of 'popular' religion. It is believed that most of the ibises, falcons, cats and dogs were votive dedications made by what might best be described as 'pilgrims' to Saqqara. The mummies might have been offered in thanks for some good fortune attributed to the god, or given in

the hope that such fortune would follow. That the cults were popular is witnessed by the many thousands of ibises discovered by Emery.

The number of dog burials is more difficult to estimate as they are not in pots and the mummies are in very poor condition – they have often been broken up by ancient looters and so numbers can only be estimated by sampling. However we have been able to make a series of estimates based on the numbers of individuals in a series of 15 litre samples, and the large dog catacomb *could* have contained as many as eight million animals.

Sadly we do not know the exact time period over which the catacombs operated. However, the numbers of animals needed annually would be very large – too large for them to all have lived at the Anubieion temple or to have all been mummified there. We therefore suggest that there may have been a series of ‘puppy farms’ at Saqqara and in Memphis where the animals were bred. We used the term ‘puppy’ advisedly since many of the animals were very young, some a matter of days or hours old, when they were mummified. Their small size accounts for the large numbers in our samples and the large overall estimate of numbers.

These young animals must have been deliberately killed, or allowed to die after separation from their mothers, and then mummified. But it must be remembered that the Egyptians would not have thought of this as a cruel act. The dedicatees wanted to do a good deed for a representative of Anubis – to provide a burial fitting for a god, one which would provide for the eternity of the animal. It is known from the ibis cult that mass burials took place once a year and we might suggest the same for the dogs. That being so, pilgrims may not have seen the mummy for which they paid; instead they may simply have entrusted the burial to the priests, without realising that their votive dog was merely a puppy, rather than one of the healthy adult animals they had seen within the Anubieion temple.

Thus far, we have referred to dogs – and the majority of animals in the catacomb are indeed *Canis familiaris*, the domestic dog. However, there are also other canines and canine-like creatures buried there, including jackals, foxes



and ichneumons, as well as a number of cats. There are also two human mummies, both in a very poor state of preservation, which raises interesting questions about the links between human and animal burials.

Who Took The Dogs Out?

Many of the burial galleries in the catacomb are now completely empty. This is not because they were never used; enough debris remains for us to see that they were once filled with mummies. Inevitably this raises the question of ‘who took the dogs out?’

We believe that areas of the catacomb were systematically emptied so that the mummies could be used as either fuel or fertiliser. Until the early twentieth century it was not uncommon for licences to

ABOVE

Gallery 38 of the Dog Catacomb showing the mass of mummified remains, now largely reduced to powder and bones through decay and disturbance. The average depth of the remains is about 1·10m.

BELOW:

Complete and undisturbed dog mummies lying on the surface of the mummy pile within the dog catacomb.





ABOVE:
Looking along Gallery 13.
Blocking is visible on the left
and there are soot marks from
lamps at regular intervals along
the gallery wall.

BELOW:
Dr. Scott Williams surveying
with a hand-held laser
Electron Distance Meter.

be granted for the removal of archaeological material for industrial or agricultural use – as witnessed by the well-known story of ship-loads of cat mummies being brought to Liverpool for sale as fertiliser. A similar fate may have befallen many of the dog mummies.

The careful survey of the catacomb has revealed a series of smoke-blackened niches for lamps (*see above*). These were first thought to be from when the catacomb was cut, or to assist the priests during the mass burial. However as they occur almost exclusively in the empty galleries, this suggests they were in fact to aid the work of those who were emptying the catacomb.



Conclusion

The *Catacombs of Anubis Project* has attempted to focus on the catacomb itself and on its mummified occupants, rather than on the temples which have often been the main source of attention for those interested in the animal cults. The new survey and the faunal analysis have raised a whole series of interesting new questions regarding the procurement of the animals, their mummification, the relationship of the dedicatees with the animals and how they were bred. It has also thrown interesting light on the later history of an important but hitherto neglected monument.

The detailed results of the project are about to be published in the *Peeters/British Museum Publications in Egypt and Sudan* series as: *The Catacombs of Anubis at North Saqqara: An Archaeological Perspective*.

Acknowledgments

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