

EGYPT

Tuna el-Gebel

Tuna el-Gebel was the necropolis of Hun (Hermopolis Magna). It is located in Al Minya Governorate in Middle Egypt, 300 km south of Cairo. Today's village has given the name to a 7-km-long burial ground on the western edge of the desert. It is here that the inhabitants of the nearby town of Hermopolis Magna were buried (as from around 1500 BC).

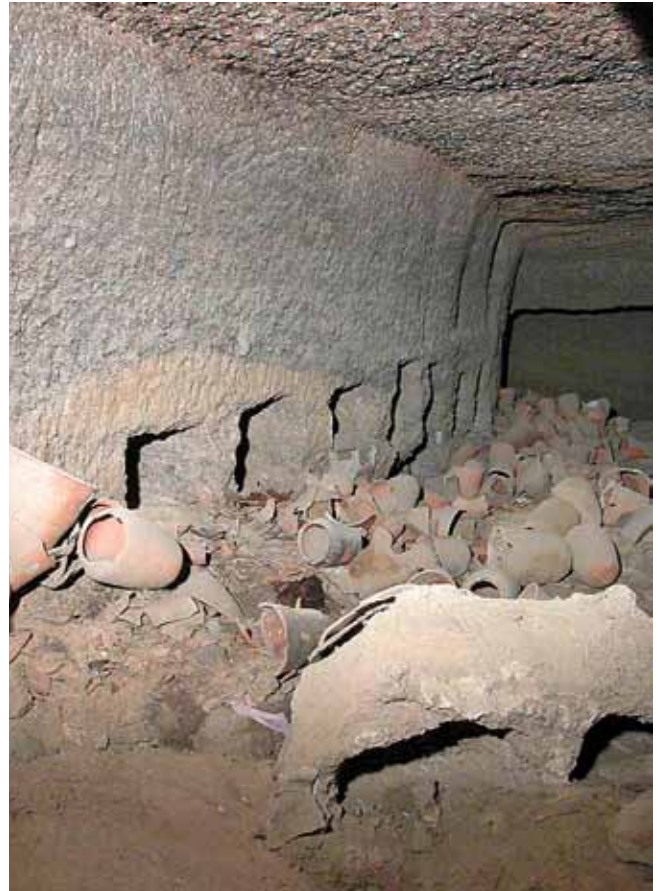
Since 1989 the Institute of Egyptology at Munich University and the Faculty of Archaeology at the University of Cairo have been working together in the southernmost area of the cemetery of Tuna el-Gebel, focusing on the extensive catacombs dug under the necropolis which were used to store thousands of sacred mummies of falcons, baboons and ibises. Most of the animal burials date to the Graeco-Roman Period (7th cent. BC – 1st cent. AD) and a baboon sarcophagus dating to Darius I was found here as well as a number of stone ibis sarcophagi. The side chambers of the catacombs are packed with pottery containing the mummified bodies of the birds.

Tuna el-Gebel is the only Egyptian animal cemetery that is suitable to be made accessible to the public in order to illustrate the ancient Egyptian custom of burying sacred animals underground.

Damages to the burial site already occurred in ancient times when the ceilings of some corridors and galleries collapsed. These damages have however increased in recent years and are partly caused by an unchecked moving-about of great numbers of tourists (thousands of schoolchildren) above ground leading to vibrations and cracks in the ceilings below; and partly by unauthorised excavations mostly in the 19th and 20th centuries, but continuing until today in unguarded sections. Nowadays, objects from the underground galleries (bronzes, statuettes, amulets, animal mummies) can be found in all major museums. Almost all wall closures of plastered and painted mudbrick and practically all smaller niches were and are still occasionally being damaged or destroyed during the search for precious objects. Without conservation measures the remaining fragments of painted walls are at risk of falling off and being lost altogether. Furthermore, on the whole the wall decorations in the disturbed baboon chambers are blackened by a firm layer of soot and resin. Consequently, today there are hardly any "untouched" sections of the animal cemetery left, thus not only causing damage to the structure itself but also to the scientific information value.

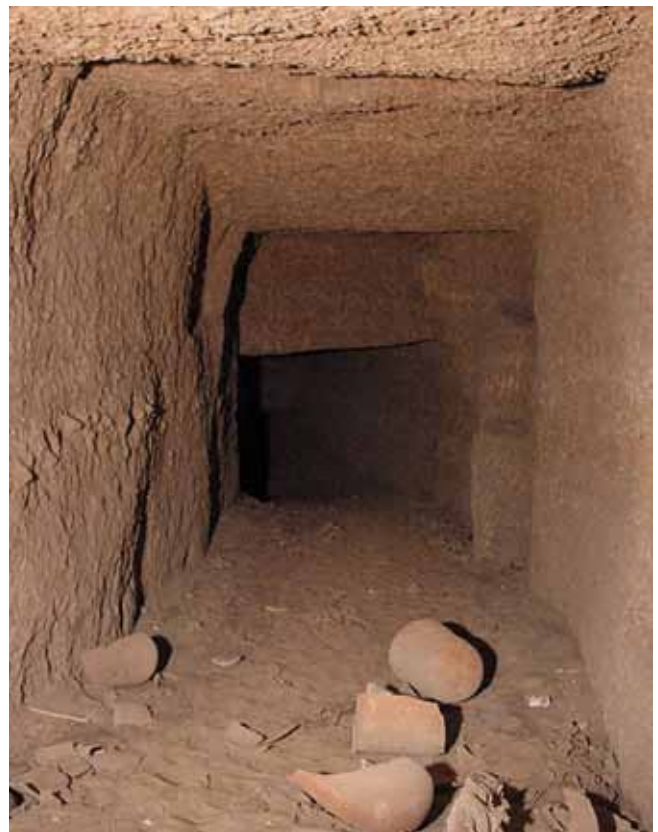
Ever since major excavations by the University of Cairo took place between the 1930s and 1950s, no large-scale stabilisation measures in – or outside the animal cemetery have been carried out. Restorations have concentrated on the few corridors accessible to tourists. Therefore, apart from excavations in some selected areas the joint mission of the universities of Munich and Cairo has largely concentrated on trying to make some of the underground galleries safe against intruders.

(For a more detailed description of the situation at Tuna el-Gebel see D. Kessler, "Tuna el-Gebel: Arbeiten in einem unterirdischen Tierfriedhof", in: E. Emmerling (ed.), *Toccare – Non Toccare*, ICOMOS Journals of the German National Committee XLVII, Munich 2009, pp. 59–72 and K. Schlüter, "Textile Wandgestaltung in Tuna el-Gebel", in: *ibid.*, pp. 73–80.)



Tuna el-Gebel, view into a lateral corridor filled with clay pots (photo: D. Kessler)

Lateral corridor from the Persian era, empty (photo: D. Kessler)





Sooted wall painting (photo: D. Kessler)



Crumbling wall plaster (photos: D. Kessler)

