In Autumn 2011 the EES, with Egyptian and German colleagues, was involved in running the first field school to be held at Quesna, where the Society has been excavating for a number of years. Joanne Rowland reports on this successful new venture.

The EES mission at Quesna in Minufiyeh Governorate was very pleased to host the first archaeological field school to be held at the site, from mid-September until mid-October 2011, at the same time as the Society was also involved in training at the AERA/SCA field school at Memphis (see David Jeffreys’ article pp.5-6).

Since this was the first formal field school in the governorate, the training at Quesna focused on the basic principles of excavation methodology and the recording and excavation of human skeletal remains, with introductory training on the recording of ceramic finds and conservation techniques in the field. The field school ran alongside the EES team’s season of excavation, conservation and recording at Quesna, which enabled the students to participate in all stages of the work.

The trainees were seven SCA inspectors from the Delta, three students from the University of Minufiyeh Faculty of Archaeology (based in Shibin el-Kom) and two students from the Free University, Berlin.

The key aim of the field school was to equip students with the basic skills necessary to approach archaeological investigation: to assess the suitability of certain locations for excavation trenches, to lay out trenches correctly, and to understand the principles of single-context excavation methodology (as based on the Museum of London system). These principles, amongst others, were taught by the writer and Geoffrey Tassie. The emphasis was on the necessity of recording each archaeological feature (context) individually, ensuring that all excavated sediment was sieved and that the recovered artefacts and ecofacts were kept separately from other contexts. The students were taught that each archaeological context – be it a cut or the fill of a pit, including burials or parts of a structure – must be photographed, planned and recorded both on recording forms as well as in field notebooks, prior to removal. A crucial factor within the training was that all procedures could be carried out using inexpensive equipment that can be acquired locally in Egypt – the same kinds of equipment that the students would be most likely to have available in their future fieldwork.

The first two weeks of training focused on excavation processes, with the students working predominantly within an excavation area to the south of the falcon necropolis. This was an area that had not been investigated previously by the current mission, and the magnetometer survey results from 2006 proved successful in detecting an area of pit and coffin burials within the Ptolemaic-Roman cemetery (see EA 28, p.32; and reports in JEA volumes 93, 94 and 96). Due to the nature of the archaeological material, the students were well trained in physical anthropology, under the tuition of
Lawrence Owens, learning to recognise all the bones of the human skeleton and how to assess age at death and the sex of the individual. The students also gained experience in examining human skeletal remains for evidence of disease and injury. In small groups, under regular supervision, they worked alongside more experienced colleagues on a number of individual burials, taking responsibility for all aspects of their excavation areas, including the drawing of the skeletal remains in situ.

So that all participants might be engaged in the entire excavation process, everyone was directly involved with ‘in the field’ conservation, which included the consolidation of bones as well as the labelling, extraction and reconstruction of the ceramic coffins. Yasser Mohammed, our conservator from the SCA, worked with the students on the excavation when specific conservation issues arose, and during the second half of the field school the students received specialised training from Yasser in the on-site lab, on how to remove corrosion from metals, consolidate and reconstruct other fragile objects, and to join and reconstruct the ceramic coffins that they had excavated in summer 2011, in addition to those from previous seasons. As part of this second half of the field school, specialised training was also provided on ceramic analysis by Ashraf el-Senussi (who has worked with our team since 2007), and Mandy Mamedow. During this phase, in order that the students could keep in touch with the on going results of the excavation, they worked in the trench each morning until the second breakfast (about 10am), after which they moved up to the on-site research facilities to join their respective tutors. The students were able to work with ceramic material from the ongoing excavations, and also with a diverse range of ceramics of various types, dates and fabrics located during previous seasons at Quesna, including early Old Kingdom material from the mastaba tomb (see EA 38, pp.10-13), as well as ceramics from other locations within Minufiyeh.

Since the aim of the field school was to train students in excavation techniques and recording, it was crucial that most of the instruction was given in the field. However, every Saturday formal lectures were held in Shibin el-Kom, thanks to our collaboration with Ahmed Deraz, Head of the Faculty of Archaeology at the University of Minufiyeh. The lectures focused upon the key elements of instruction from the previous week and concluded with a short test. At the end of the field school, there was a formal exam, which, I am pleased to report, was passed by all of the attending students.

As this edition of EA goes to press, plans are already underway for the second field school in autumn 2012. In addition to basic archaeological field methodology, additional training will be offered in surveying techniques, including geophysical survey, drawing of small finds and the analysis of both plant and animal remains. We also hope to increase the number of formal lectures at the University of Minufiyeh, which will enable more students from the Faculty of Archaeology to become involved in at least part of the field school.

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