A Brief Report on the 2012 Season
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From 31 January to 5 March 2012, our excavation team was back in Egypt for the continuation of our work at Saqqara. It is probably well-known that we had to cancel our 2011 season due to the Egyptian revolution, which broke out five days before our planned flight to Cairo. Some days later, our site in Saqqara was visited by a gang of youthful plunderers. Looking for gold and other phantasms, they forced open the doors to our store-rooms in the corner-chapels of the New Kingdom tombs, ripped open the protective cupboards constructed around the relief panels, pushed the lid off a limestone sarcophagus, and even dislodged a broken column in order to look under its base (an ancient superstition has that there is

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a pot of gold under every column). On top of all this, April 2011 saw torrential rains, which caused the erosion of several protective mud-brick walls and disfigured some reliefs with streaks of mud.

Therefore, the 2012 season concentrated on repair and restoration. We succeeded in finding the required extra financial means from the Prince Claus Foundation and the culture fund of the Dutch Embassy in Cairo and would hereby like to thank them again for their support. Initially we had also hoped to continue the excavations proper, but from December onwards we knew that this would not be allowed in view of the persistent security problems at Saqqara. Instead, we hoped to find the time for some study and registration of older finds. We are happy to report that this indeed proved to be possible, as some team members were indeed able to sit behind their desks and make themselves useful after having helped clear the chaos left by the plunderers.

From the outset, the main question on everybody’s mind was of course what the situation would be in our storerooms. Had the robbers stolen a lot, or had they perhaps smashed our finds out of frustration when they could not find what they wanted (as happened to the Czech expedition at Abusir, where all the shelves of the storeroom were ‘wiped clean’)? During our very first visit to the site on 4 February we noticed that some doors stood ajar, whilst inside we saw a jumble of crates and cardboard boxes, all thrown over the floor or overturned. We must confess that our hearts sank, but when we started work two days later we soon concluded that all was not too bad. The unwanted visitors had quickly understood that there was nothing to be had from the storage of pottery and bones, so after two days of tidying up

![Fig. 3 The Maya E storeroom as found.](image1)

![Fig. 4 The Maya E storeroom as reorganized.](image2)

Ladislava Horáčková and Barbara Aston were able to get back to work. We then asked artists Lyla Brock and Dorothea Schulz (who had been waiting for news from us before coming to Saqqara) to join us and both of them contributed to the processing of the pottery finds from previous years.

Regrettably, total chaos reigned in a storeroom for small finds. Many funerary
statuettes, amulets and textile fragments were found trampled down in the sand, covering the floor. The inspection and repacking of this material only took three days, but a final verdict on our losses could only be given after we had also seen the contents of the central magazine of the Supreme Council for Antiquities (SCA), near the Saqqara Museum. This magazine contains the most precious finds of our excavations in an extra secure depot. Accordingly we checked and repacked every single item there, and then entered the data into a single computer register. This finally allowed us to confirm that the robbers took about 120 objects from our field magazines, mostly fragments of shabtis, amulets and jewellery, and some Coptic textiles. Fortunately, we did not lose any information, since all finds had already been photographed, described, and in many cases even published. The benefit of all these exertions is that we now dispose of a perfect registration system which will in future allow us to trace an object within seconds.

The storerooms for relief fragments had fared little better: three magazines full of large chunks, plus another one with minor fragments in crates. The former had been opened by the robbers but not
disturbed, because the blocks were too heavy to be carried away. Here we used the opportunity to stack the blocks in a more organized way and to check all the excavation numbers: a truly backbreaking experience that we only survived thanks to the unexpected help of Vincent Oeters (who joined us for one week). The storage room with small fragments was found in a state of utter chaos, but here too we restored order and repacked the material. The carpenter provided new shelving, so that we now possess magazines in perfect working condition and a computer register of their contents. In the end, about fifty small fragments were reported missing.

We may conclude that we have been extremely lucky, especially when compared to the sad reports about other sites, where even a whole year after the revolution armed gangs are still looking for treasure (some with the aid of bulldozers!). While we were underway registering finds, the team of our architect Nicholas Warner was frantically repairing all the damages. In two weeks all the wrecked doors and cupboards were replaced or repaired, and provided with a fresh layer of paint. The imperfect roof constructions of the tombs of Pay and Ptahemwia was adapted, ensuring that rain water will no longer drain over the walls but can instead drip down from projecting eaves.
The roofs themselves were now covered in cement, and several barrel vaults and walls received a fresh coat of mud plaster. The dislodged column of Ptahemwia was re-erected, broken bolts replaced, and at the end of the season we installed new padlocks everywhere. Finally, in many places the wire mesh intended to keep out the birds has been replaced by a finer variety.

In the meantime, we ourselves coordinated the work of a whole team of SCA restorers. They repaired the sarcophagus lid of Raia (which had snapped into two halves when we tried to push it back into place) and fixed the gypsum coating of the wall reliefs in the chapel of Khay I. In the chapel of Tatia (found in 2009), we restored the last bits of limestone and gypsum plaster to the south door-jamb and stela (including a large chunk that had been reported as missing three years ago but was now retrieved during our inspection of one of the magazines). All reliefs were cleaned once again and their pigments consolidated. Dorothea recorded the new restorations in her drawings, which enabled us to finally read the last (hitherto unintelligible) text on the stela. Just in time for Vincent, who is writing a paper on this nice little chapel!

Among our other projects we can mention that we welcomed Daniela Picchi as a new team member. Daniela is curator of the Museo Archeologico in Bologna and has started an iconographical and stylistic study of the reliefs of Maya and Horemheb (something that has never been done before). She was also in Saqqara in order to prepare the donation to Egypt of two further casts of reliefs, the originals of which are in Bologna. One is a famous scene of seated prisoners from the tomb of Horemheb, the other a pilaster from the tomb of Ptahemwia. So far, the reactions of the Egyptian authorities were rather enthusiastic, and we hope to be able to install the two casts during our 2013 season. We cannot wait …