

A Memphite High Priest at the Fall of the Old Kingdom

Josep Cervelló Autuori and **Daniel González León** introduce Imephor Impy Nikauptah—a Memphite high priest buried at Kom el-Khamaseen, whose titles suggest he lived through the end of the Old Kingdom and into the First Intermediate Period.

Photo: Spanish-Egyptian Archaeological Mission in Saqqara (SEAMS)



Partial view of the hilltop of Kom el-Khamaseen, with the Step Pyramid of Netjerikhet-Djoser on the horizon.

Inscribed stone weight from the tomb of Imephor: “Sem-priest Imephor, his beautiful name, Impy, his great name, Nikauptah”, (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, ÄM 8032).

Imephor Impy Nikauptah at Kom el-Khamaseen

Imephor Impy Nikauptah is the best documented individual buried at Kom el-Khamaseen. This is a small necropolis located on a hilltop 3 km west of the pyramid of Djedkare Izezi at Saqqara, dating to the late Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period (c. 2360-2055 BCE). It is situated unusually deep in the desert, far from the cultivation and all other cemeteries of the Memphite necropolis. Unfortunately, this isolation has made the site an easy target for looters.

The tomb was the victim of looting from as early as the second half of the 19th Century CE. In June 1881, the German Egyptologist

Heinrich Brugsch purchased a stone weight from an antiquities dealer in Saqqara that featured a double inscription: on one side, the indication of the weight (10 *deben*), and on the other, the three names of Imephor and one of his titles (*sem*-priest). Brugsch transferred

Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung / Sandra Steiß



the weight to the Berlin Museum, where it is now stored.

The Kom el-Khamaseen Project team from the Institut d'Estudis del Pròxim Orient Antic of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona first surveyed the site in 1997. But in 1999, it was violently looted by heavy machinery, which destroyed it to a large extent. Following the looting, the Inspectorate of Saqqara, under the responsibility of Dr Mohammad Youssef, recovered a total of 57 limestone blocks or fragments and five granite fragments with inscriptions or reliefs. In 2005, this material, stored in the Saqqara magazines, was studied by the Spanish team and Imephor was discovered. Indeed, half of the inscriptions, including the granite fragments, referred to him. They repeatedly record his three names: two theophoric names embedding the names of Horus and Ptah—Imephor and Nikauptah—and the nickname Impy, after the name Imephor.

The Titles and Chronology of Imephor Impy Nikauptah

Imephor's main title was 'greatest of the directors of craftsmen', the title of the high priest of the cults of the gods Ptah and Sokar in Memphis. The absence of this title on the Berlin weight is why Imephor does not appear in the lists of Memphite high priests compiled so far. He also holds the titles 'sem-priest', 'chief lector priest', and 'foremost'. These titles were introduced to the titularies of the Old Kingdom Memphite high priests during the reign of Pepy I, when the office was subjected to major reforms. The first Memphite high priest to hold them was Sabu Tjety, living in the mid and late 6th Dynasty (c. 2300 BCE). Imephor, therefore, should date later than this official. Only one other documented individual has held the office between Sabu and the beginning of the First Intermediate Period: Ptahshepses Impy, known from a statue kept in the Louvre and dated by style to the late 6th Dynasty (c. 2250 BCE). According to Charles Maystre, the title 'hereditary prince' is introduced and forms a doublet with 'foremost' in the titularies of the Memphite high priests from the Middle Kingdom. In Imephor's documents, the title 'hereditary prince' does not appear, though 'foremost' does. On these grounds, Imephor likely lived during the First Intermediate Period (c. 2160-2055 BCE). In addition, the palaeography



Photo: SEAMS

of his inscriptions also points to this conclusion.

Two further pieces of evidence confirm this chronology. Firstly, compound names similar in structure to Imephor are known for the First Intermediate Period, with the nickname Impy and a theonym, such as Impy-Zeker. The second indicator relates to the *htp-di-nsw* (offering) formula documented on two of Imephor's limestone block fragments, in which the god Geb is invoked. This deity rarely appears in this context during the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period, and even less likely if the list of offerings immediately follows the god's name, as is the case here. To our knowledge, there is only one other example from Herakleopolis Magna, dated precisely to the First Intermediate Period.

In March 2009, a limestone block from Kom el-Khamaseen, conveniently trimmed and placed on a support, was exhibited in an art gallery in Madrid. Its provenance was easily identified as it included the three names of Imephor, especially as the name Imephor is a *hapax*, meaning that it is only attested for this official. Subsequent research has shown that this block was contiguous to and formed part of the same wall as other blocks stored at

One of the 57 limestone blocks from the tomb of Imephor recovered after the 1999 looting.

A limestone block from the looted tomb of Imephor exhibited in an art gallery in Madrid, Spain.



Photo: SEAMS

Saqqara. Shortly after, in October of the same year, several fragments containing inscriptions with the names and titles of Imephor appeared for sale in an antiques gallery in Barcelona. It was indeed a coincidence that the first pieces from the plundering of Kom el-Khamaseen offered for sale on the antiquities market, of which we were aware, all appeared in Spain.

A statuette of Imephor accessed on the website of an art gallery in Melbourne, Australia.



Immediately, a systematic search was started on the websites of the leading art galleries worldwide. So far, a few more limestone block fragments and 11 funerary statuettes of Imephor have been found. Like Imephor's name, these statuettes are also unique. They measure between 15 and 30 cm and present Imephor in an unusual posture: standing, with or without a dorsal pillar, legs and feet together, arms attached to the body, long bipartite wig, short skirt, scarf in hand, and always an

The infill of a mastaba at Kom el-Khamaseen, which is likely that belonging to Imephor.

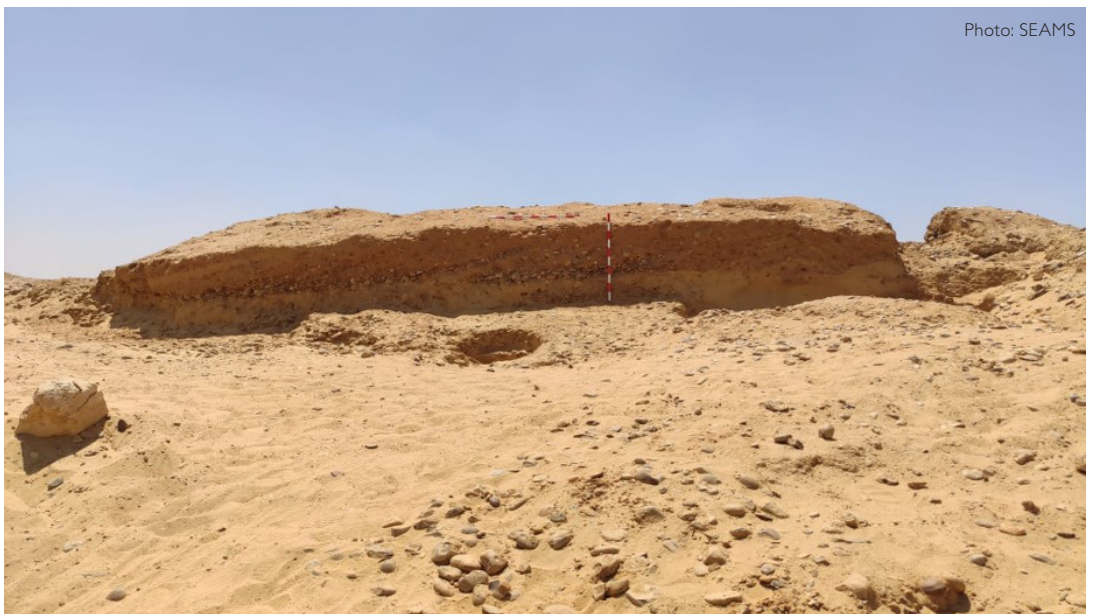


Photo: SEAMS

inscription including Imephor's three names engraved on the right arm. There are very few parallels of such a position from this period, and none have names inscribed on the arm.

New titles and epithets of Imephor are documented on the block from Madrid. These include the complete form of his main title: 'greatest of the directors of craftsmen in the two houses', as well as the titles: 'gracious of arm' and 'director of every divine office', and the epithet: 'the one who acts with his two arms'. This new information was significant for three reasons:

1. The titles 'gracious of arm' and 'director of every divine office' are held by high officials of the Memphite court in the Old Kingdom, especially by viziers, which indicates that Imephor must have been (or must have presented himself as) an official of high rank. This is further supported by the distinctive architecture of his tomb: the roof of his burial chamber was formed by limestone blocks gabled at 90-degree angles and inscribed with two long lines of text per slope containing, once again, his names and titles. The use of granite also points in this direction
2. The epithet 'the one who acts with his two arms' is not attested until the Middle Kingdom, making Imephor possibly the first official to bear it.
3. Neither these titles nor the epithet are borne by any other Memphite high priest of the Old Kingdom. Indeed, Imephor was a unique official in terms of his career.



Photo: SEAMS



Photo: SEAMS

Latest Findings at Kom el-Khamaseen

The Barcelona team returned to the site, and excavations took place over four seasons between spring 2019 to fall 2022. By the end of 2022, the site had been entirely excavated to bedrock. 75% of the inscribed material, both limestone and granite, comes from the tomb of Imephor, who remains the best-known individual in the necropolis and whose tomb must have been the most prominent monument built there.

Although no monument survives intact, the eastern half of a mastaba infill was identified. In the north-east corner of this infill, a complete and intact foundation deposit was found, consisting of 60 small pottery vessels, many with their lids preserved, two miniature alabaster dishes, and five sandstone millstones composed of two pieces each: the base and the grinding stone. The pottery vessels date the building to the First Intermediate Period, the same period of Imephor. Based on this evidence, it is possible that this mastaba belonged to Imephor.

From the northern sectors of the site come the most remarkable series of blocks from Kom el-Khamaseen: those that formed the gabled roof of the funerary chamber of Imephor. Six of these blocks have been known since 2005, but the rest, up to as many as 24, have appeared during the 2021 and 2022 seasons. Found far from the mastaba infill, they had been moved by looters using heavy machinery. With this material, the roof and its inscriptions can be reconstructed in their

entirety. It was formed of 26 rectangular-shaped blocks, 13 on each sloping side, about 1.25 m long by 20–30 cm wide and thick, with beveled ends meeting at right angles. In the 2021 season, the block fragment that crowned one of the short walls of the chamber was found, with a right-angled molding on which the first two attached blocks on each slope of the roof rested. This block is inscribed with the list of sacred oils.

Each slope of the gabled roof has two parallel lines of text crossing all the blocks arranged vertically. The text of each line consists of the three names of Imephor repeated twice, accompanied by his most important titles. These texts reveal new aspects of Imephor's titulary, career, and date:

1. One of the lines includes a new variant of the main title: 'greatest of the directors

Above left: The foundation deposit located in the north-east corner of the mastaba at Kom el-Khamaseen.

Above right: Blocks from the gabled roof of the funerary chamber of Imephor.

Below: Recreation of the gabled roof with the right-angled block fragment in place.

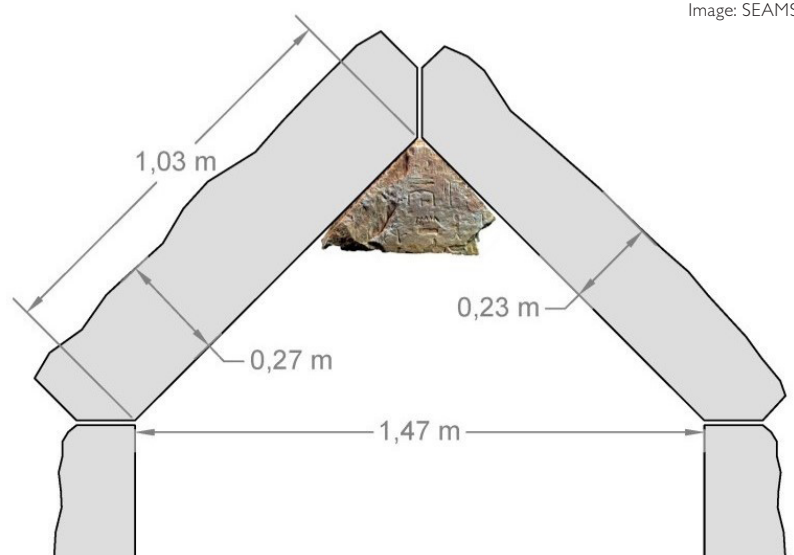


Image: SEAMS

One of Imephor's statuettes found during the 2022 season.

of craftsmen in the double administration', of uncertain interpretation. Once again, this title is not attested in the titulary of any other Memphite high priest of the Old Kingdom. It might refer to a section of the administration headed by the vizier and specialising in the equipment of the royal monuments.

2. In another line, the epithet 'venerable before his lord' is documented. This epithet is rarely used in the Old Kingdom. While the epithets 'the one who loves his lord', 'beloved of his lord', and 'confident of his lord' frequently appear in the titularies of Memphite high priests, 'venerable before his lord' is only documented for Ptahshepses IV, who lived during the first half of the 6th Dynasty (c. 2345–2360 BCE).
3. At the end of a third line, the epithet 'true of voice' can be read. This epithet was first used with reference to private individuals during the late First Intermediate Period (c. 2125–2055 BCE).

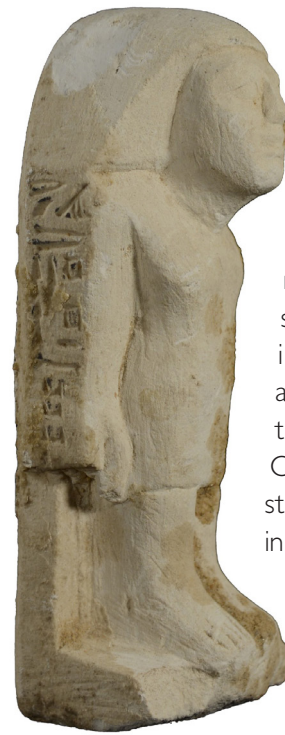
The most significant find of the 2022 season was undoubtedly a large accumulation of statuettes from a small area in the north-west sector. A complete but eroded statuette and the feet of another were recovered in other sectors during the 2021 season. The latest discovery consisted of complete statuettes, upper or lower parts, and even loose heads, faces or feet. A first estimate indicates that all these complete and fragmentary pieces corresponded to a total of more than 100 statuettes. All the complete pieces, and those

The group of Imephor's statuettes found during the 2022 season, totalling more than 100 figurines.



Photo: SEAMS

Photo: SEAMS



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that preserve the right arm, have the three names of Imephor inscribed on them. Separate fragments of the inscribed arm have also been recovered. The statuettes are identical to those already known from the antiques market. One third of the statuettes are sculpted in white Tura limestone of fine quality, while the remaining two-thirds are in local yellow limestone. In general, due to the quality of the limestone, the latter

are poorly preserved and have more surface erosion than the former. However, the essential characteristics are always the same. What is the meaning of this large concentration of funerary statuettes? Should it be interpreted as a forerunner of what would later become the *ushabtis*? This is undoubtedly another of Imephor's singularities.

All the material featuring inscriptions and reliefs as well as the foundation deposit and grave goods, including statuettes, fragments of stelae and offering tables, have been transferred to the Saqqara magazines, where they have recently been photographed and analysed. This study will allow us to learn more about this unique Memphite high priest who lived through the fall of the Old Kingdom and the politically troubled period that followed, perhaps as one of its leading actors.

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Learn more about the project via their website:

<https://khamaseenproject.uab.cat>