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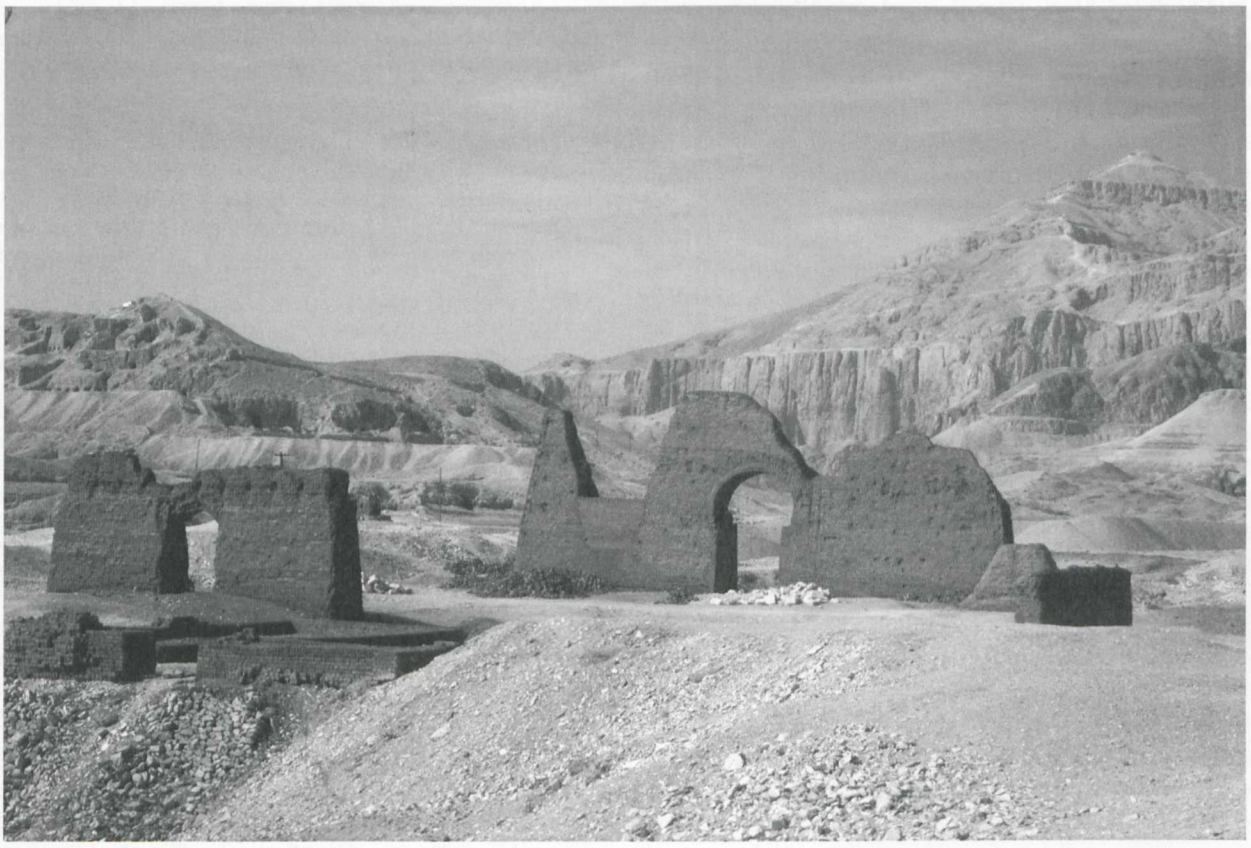
**ASASIF,** one of the principal areas of the Theban necropolis, located on the eastern bank of the Nile River (25°44′N, 32°36′E). The exact meaning of the Arabic term *al-ʿasasif* is not known, although the translation "passages interconnecting under the ground" has been suggested. More likely, however, the term is a plural of *al-ʿassaf,* which is attested as a personal name. Thus the term may refer to a tribe or clan that claimed descent from a certain individual al-ʿAssaf. Topographically, the area known as the Asasif stretches from the edge of the cultivation in the southeast to (and including) the tomb and temple of Nebhepetre Montuhotep I and the terrace temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri in the northwest. Besides these two temples, the most visible landmarks in the area today are huge, towerlike mud-brick buildings (pylons) that form the superstructures of large private tombs of the Saite period (the twenty-sixth dynasty, 664–525 BCE).



ASASIF. *Pylons from the tomb of Montuemhat.* (Courtesy Dieter Arnold)

The Asasif was first used as a royal and private cemetery during the second half of the eleventh dynasty (c.2050 BCE), when Nebhepetre Montuhotep I built there instead of at the necropolis of his predecessors (Antef I, Antef II, and Antef III) in el-Tarif. On virgin ground, he had constructed for himself an ambitious and innovative royal tomb-and-temple complex. When excavated, that complex contained the main burial of the king, as well as several additional burial shafts for royal princesses and wives of the king. High officials of his court had their tombs built in the cliffs overlooking the Asasif and at Deir el-Bahri; lower court officials had their tombs cut in the plain. The prevailing type of private tomb during this period was the *saff*-tomb, whose architecture was strongly influenced by that of the royal tombs in el-Tarif (e.g., the tomb of Antef, tomb 386 in Western Thebes). Most of this period's tombs have their central axis oriented toward the long artificial causeway that connected the temple of Nebhepetre with an (unknown) valley temple on the edge of the cultivation. After the first decades of the twelfth dynasty, when the king and his court moved to the new capital, Itjtawy, in northern Egypt, the Asasif was abandoned as a major burial ground for more than four hundred years.

At the beginning of the eighteenth dynasty (c.1569 BCE), the Asasif again became the scene of extensive building activity. Amenhotpe I had a small structure (a pyramid?) erected to the north of the temple of Nebhepetre Montuhotep I. Less than fifty years later, Hatshepsut (r. 1502–1482 BCE) chose a nearby location as the place for her mortuary temple. Her famous terrace temple in Deir el-Bahri, which combined architectural features from Nebhepetre's temple with those of the *saff*-tombs, continued to be one of the most important sacred places in the Theban necropolis until Greco-Roman times. For the construction of the temple's causeway, which was at least partially flanked by sphinxes, several earlier buildings and *saff*-tombs at Asasif had to be destroyed or covered. Close to the causeway and the enclosure wall of the temple lies the "hidden" private tomb of Senenmut (tomb 353), who was, in part, responsible for the construction of Hatshepsut's mortuary temple. The tombs of some other high officials of that time were located in the nearby hills of Khokhah, and Qurna, and they were oriented to Hatshepsut's causeway (e.g., those of Puimre, tomb 39; Nebamun, tomb 65; Hapuseneb, tomb 67; Senenmut, tomb 71; and his brother, Senimen, tomb 252). During the remaining time of the eighteenth dynasty to the twentieth, the main private cemeteries were shifted to other areas in

the Theban necropolis (to Qurna, Khokhah, and Dra Abul Naga). The temple and causeway of Hatshepsut, however, remained the center for a number of highly important festivals and ceremonies (e.g., the Valley feast), and court officials occasionally used the Asasif as a burial ground (e.g., the tombs in the Kharuef complex).

In the twentieth dynasty, Ramesses IV (r.1166–1160 BCE) initiated the construction of his gigantic mortuary temple complex near the southeastern edge of the Asasif. The size of that temple would have surpassed by far that of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu, but the ambitious project never progressed beyond the initial stage. For the construction of the temple's foundations, a large section of Nebhepetre's causeway had to be dismantled. In addition, a number of earlier tombs of that period were either destroyed or entirely covered. For nearly four hundred years after the end of the twentieth dynasty (c.1075–690 BCE), no major building activities are known for the Asasif. As the twenty-fifth dynasty became the twenty-sixth, it once again became the focus of the Theban necropolis. Partly, this was due to the increasing importance of the goddess Hathor, whose main center of worship at that time seems to have been the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut. Then, too, the highest officials of the Theban administration created large subterranean tomb complexes there, known as the Saite tombs, whose main architectural features were huge towerlike superstructures (pylons) and large open sun courts. Some of the Saite tombs exceed, both in their dimensions and in the quality of their decoration, most of the earlier royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings and are among the largest private funerary monuments ever built in Egypt (e.g., those of Sheshonq, tomb 27; Harwa, tomb 37; Montuemhat, tomb 34; and Pabasa, tomb 279). The contents of the decoration program and the style of the limestone reliefs frequently and consciously referred to earlier periods (the Middle Kingdom and the eighteenth dynasty). The elaborate subterranean parts of the Saite tombs made them an ideal burial ground for later periods and, in fact, they were frequently reused for intrusive burials until and throughout Greco-Roman times.

The first systematic exploration of the Asasif was in the earlier part of the twentieth century and is mainly connected with the Egyptian Expedition of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Under Herbert E. Winlock and Ambrose Lansing, the museum expedition spent more than two decades at the Asasif, during which time it unearthed the unfinished mortuary temple of Ramesses IV and a large number of Middle Kingdom and later tombs. Since the late 1960s, several excavation projects began to work in the central area. The American, Austrian, Belgian, German, and Italian projects have concentrated their efforts mainly on the Saite tombs.

[*See also* Deir el-Bahri; Theban Necropolis; *and the article on* Montuhotep I, Nebhepetre.]

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