

23 The Cave of John of Lykopolis

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Gebel Asyut al-Gharbi

Gebel Asyut al-Gharbi, a limestone mountain located to the west of Asyut at the edge of the Libyan Desert, provides much information on ancient Asyut (Kahl 2007a: 59–106). The mountain rises to a height of up to two hundred meters above sea level. During the pharaonic period, Gebel Asyut al-Gharbi served as a necropolis for the inhabitants of Asyut, high officials among them, as well as for sacred animals. In addition to this, several areas of the mountain were exploited as a quarry. In the Christian era, Christian anchorites used the numerous tombs as cells or dwellings (Kahl 2007a: 71–72) (fig. 23.1). The walls of the tombs, decorated with ancient Egyptian pictures and hieroglyphs, were either merely covered with a rough mud plaster by the anchorites, or whitewashed and decorated with inscriptions and paintings. Monasteries were also erected on Gebel Asyut al-Gharbi, with Dayr al-Meitin and Dayr al-'Izam being especially noteworthy examples, both of which were abandoned during the fifteenth century AD at the latest. Today, most of the Christian wall decorations have perished. The destruction took place especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when substantial losses occurred.

Thanks to research carried out by geologists Klemm and Klemm (Kahl 2007a: 59–61; Klemm and Klemm 2008: 112–15), it is possible to divide the mountain into eleven geological steps, which also correspond to eleven

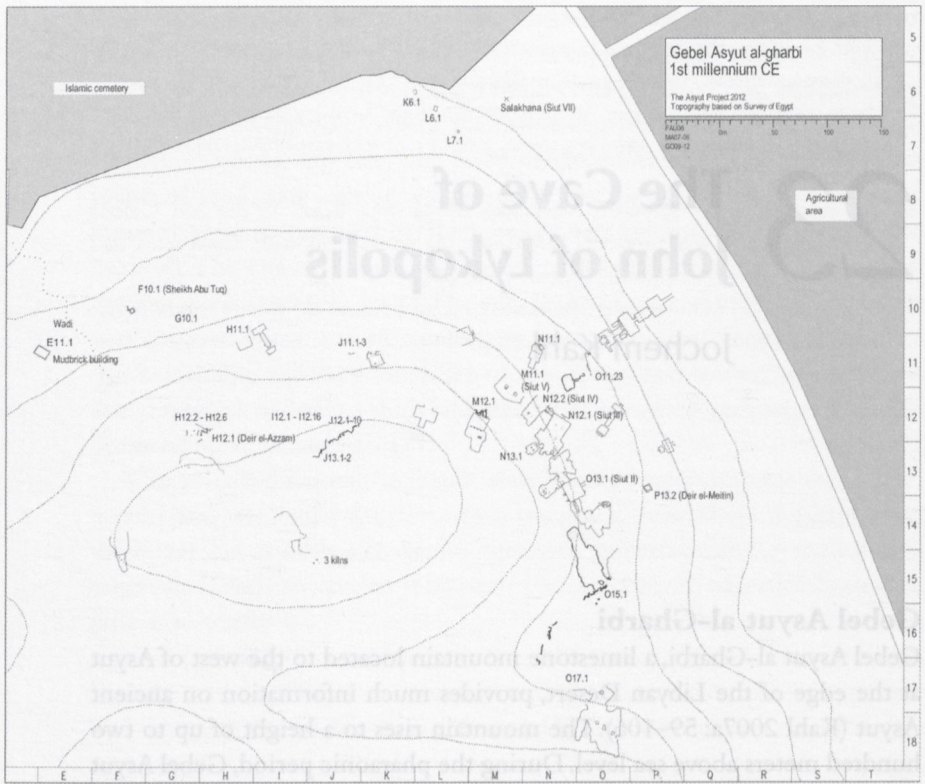


Fig 23.1. Gebel Asyut al-Gharbi in the first millennium AD. © Cornelia Goerlich, The Asyut Project.

steps of pharaonic tomb architecture. At steps 6 and 7, later also at step 2, rock tombs for the nomarchs of the First Intermediate Period and of the Middle Kingdom (approximately 2160 to 1900 BC) were driven horizontally into the mountain. With their monumental size, these tombs surpass the dimensions of coeval sepulchral structures intended for non-royal persons. The inner hall of Tomb III from the First Intermediate Period covers six hundred square meters (Kahl 2007a: 74–77); Tomb II from the early Middle Kingdom features an inner hall with a height of over twelve meters (Kahl 2007a: 85–86). Some of the proprietors of the tombs were posthumously venerated as saints (Kahl 2012), for example Djefai-Hapi I (the owner of Tomb I), Iti-ibi (the owner of Tomb III), Khety II or Khety I (the owners of Tomb IV and Tomb V, respectively). Besides these large

tombs, more than a thousand smaller burial sites were hewn into Gebel Asyut al-Gharbi, giving it the appearance of a honeycomb.

John of Lykopolis

John of Lykopolis (310/320–394/395), seer and prophet, lived as an ascetic and recluse in a cave in the western mountain of Asyut (Greek: Lykopolis). Many people consulted him. Even Emperor Theodosius trusted in John to foretell his future (Schaff and Wace 1995: 226).

Several sources written in Greek, Latin, and Coptic provide information regarding John's life and works. He was born in Asyut to Christian parents. According to the *Historia Lausiaca*, he learned the trade of carpenter while his brother became a dyer. After the death of his parents, John went into the Scetis Desert (the Wadi al-Natron) and became a monk. He was educated in different monasteries between the ages of twenty-five and thirty, studying with Apa Isidor and Apa Poemen. John's name became famous in distant monasteries because of his firm fasting and praying. Then the angel of the Lord appeared to him and instructed him to return to his hometown and teach the way of righteousness there. John consequently returned to Asyut, where he lived in a hermitage situated in the western mountain on the desert escarpment in accordance with the principles of early monasticism (*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* I, 6; Kahl 2007a: 138–39).

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According to *Historia Lausiaca* XXXV, John made himself three cells on the actual summit and then went in and immured himself. The building had no door. Accordingly, John did not leave his hermitage for forty (*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* I, 4) or forty-eight (*Historia Lausiaca* XXXV) years. Disciples gave him food and drink through a window (*Historia Lausiaca* XXXV). As John ate nothing apart from fruit, the ascetic life wore out his body so that his beard no longer grew on his face at the age of ninety years (*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* I, 17). Through the window, John communicated with the world outside, receiving visitors on Saturdays and Sundays. The visitors had to be male; John refused to receive women. A small church (Devos 1969b: 194) and a shelter (*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* I, 16; Russell 1981: 54) in the vicinity of John's cell were at the disposal of the visitors (Kahl 2007a: 139).

Nevertheless, the exact location of John's hermitage is still disputed. Dayr al-'Izam, situated on top of the mountain plateau, has been proposed

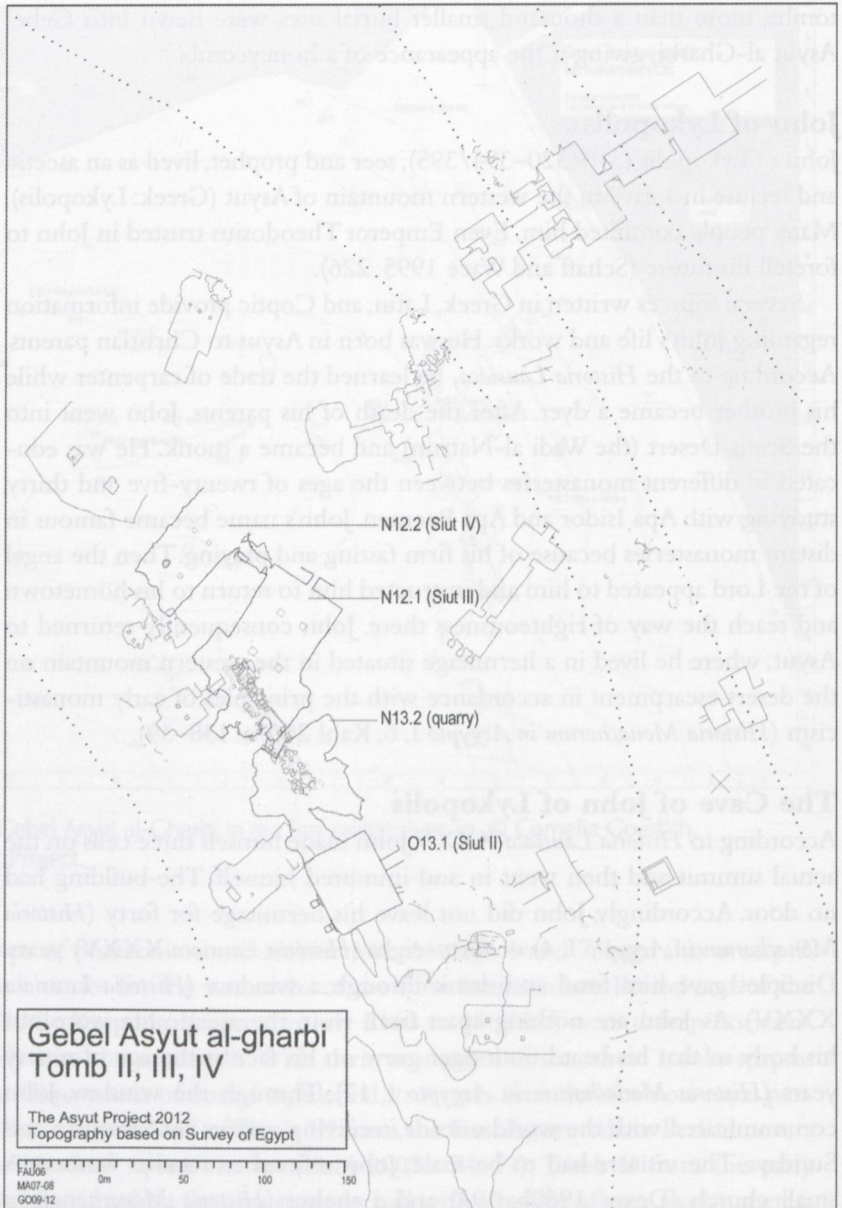


Fig. 23.2. The hermitage of St. John of Lykopolis (Asyut, Tomb II, III, IV).
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by several authors (Coquin and Martin 1991c; Zuckerman 1995), but the tripartite complex of Tomb II (and later quarry N13.2)/Tomb III/Tomb IV (N13.2/N12.1/N12.2) with its late antique corridors connecting the individual tombs should be considered as well (fig. 23.2).

A jar found at Dayr al-'Izam bears a Coptic inscription dated 1156 and naming the site "Apa John of the Desert" (Crum 1902: 33–34, pl. 1; *JdE* 3145; CG 8104). Therefore, Dayr al-'Izam is often referred to as the hermitage of St. John of Lykopolis (cf. Coquin and Martin 1991c; Grossmann 2002: 208). However, it remains unclear where the three rooms that served John for the rest of his life were located.

The fact that the earliest findings of pottery in Dayr al-'Izam can be dated no further back than the fifth to seventh century AD, according to the 2009 survey (Eichner and Beckh 2010: 207), as well as the fact that a building with three rooms, which could have served as John's hermitage, cannot be detected either today or in the excavation report from 1900 (Maspero 1900), are arguments against the assumption that Dayr al-'Izam is the site of the hermitage of St. John of Lykopolis.

The situation is different as far as the nomarch tombs of the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom are concerned: a perusal of the sources that provide us with an idea of the architecture of the hermitage show a number of congruities with Tombs II, III, and IV (fig. 23.3). An approximately two-meter-high passageway (fig. 23.4) connects Tombs IV and III, and makes it possible for a man to traverse it effortlessly in an upright position. The connection between Tombs IV and III, which dates from Christian times, is complemented with a connection between Tomb III and N13.2. The latter designates a quarry that came into operation during or after the New Kingdom and that stretches north from the inner hall of Tomb II. This quarry reached to the rear wall of Tomb III, where a passageway to Tomb II was constructed in the southwest corner (fig. 23.2). This connection of three rooms is consistent with the description in the *Historia Lausiaca*. According to *Historia Lausiaca* XXXV, John inhabited a hermitage with three rooms on the outskirts of Asyut. One chamber was for his bodily needs, another was where he worked and ate, and the third was where he prayed.

A window situated in the wall of St. John's hermitage served as a connection to the outside world, according to the *Historia Monachorum* (I, 5; I, 15). Even though the fronts of Tombs II, III, and IV were completely destroyed by mining activities in the nineteenth century (Kahl 2013: 84–85), the



Fig. 23.3. Asyut, Tombs III, IV, and V in 2007. © Frith Barthel, The Asyut Project.



Fig. 23.4. Asyut, Tomb IV: passageway connecting Tomb IV and Tomb III, 2007. © Manja Maschke, The Asyut Project.



Fig. 23.5. Asyut, Tomb III (left) and Tomb IV (right) in 1799 (*Description de l'Égypte* 1822, vol. 4: pls. 48.10, 48.4).

architectural drawings of the 1799 French Expedition (fig. 23.5) show that the front of Tomb III featured two window-like openings in addition to the entrance (*Description de l'Égypte* 1822, vol. 4: pl. 48.10), which cannot be part of the original design from the pharaonic period. It seems likely that these openings are identical with the window mentioned in the *Historia Monachorum*.

Remains of a ceiling painting are extant in the entrance area of the inner hall of Tomb IV (fig. 23.6). The remains show a bust portrait of a male figure contained in a medallion. In the man's left hand, the depiction of the upper part of a book survives; above his left shoulder, the letters Iota and Omega can still be discerned. These are the initial letters of the name Ιωάννης (Eichner and Beckh 2010: 210). The northwest pillar of Tomb IV is the only one that remains today. Its shape and the typical Coptic chisel



Fig. 23.6. Asyut, Tomb IV, inner hall, ceiling painting, after restoration in 2012.

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traces indicate a remodeling that took place in Christian times, apparently in order to utilize the inner hall of Tomb IV as a sacred space (El-Khadragy 2006: 89–90). The assumption that a saint named John was venerated in this tomb in the Christian period suggests itself—in all likelihood, the saint in question was St. John of Lykopolis.

These observations support a thesis I put forth as early as 2007, according to which Tombs II, III, and IV constituted the hermitage of St. John of Lykopolis (Kahl 2007a: 139; Kahl 2007b).

Tombs III and IV have fulfilled multiple purposes over time. During the First Intermediate Period, they initially served as tombs for the nomarchs and their relatives; they subsequently became the location for the ritual veneration of the deceased nomarchs during the Twelfth Dynasty (Rzeuska 2012: 209–10). During the Amarna Period, Tomb IV was ultimately used as a quarry (Kahl 2007a: 61–62). In Tomb III, on the other hand, pottery and *ushabtis* from the New Kingdom period were recovered, which makes it likely that the tomb was used for secondary burials at this point. During the Third Intermediate Period and/or Late Period, secondary burials certainly took place in Tomb III. This is clearly evidenced by findings from Shaft 4, which was rediscovered by the Asyut Project after going unnoticed since premodern times (Kahl, El-Khadragy, and Verhoeven 2006: 243). Only some twenty- to forty-centimeter-deep recesses hewn into the rock floor suggest further burials in pre-Christian times. Findings of late Roman, Byzantine, Coptic, and Mamluk pottery attest to the vivid Christian and post-Christian history of the tomb. To give an example, the floor of the tombs was surfaced with a layer of bones and bandages 50 to 100 centimeters thick in post-Christian times. The required building materials probably originated from the nearby Tomb of the Dogs (cf. for Tomb V, Kahl and Malur 2011: 182).

The treatment of Tombs III and IV by the archaeologists of the early twentieth century constitutes an obstacle to the interpretation of their history of usage. The Italian archaeologist Ernesto Schiaparelli and his assistant Virginio Rosa, as well as the British archaeologist David George Hogarth and the French archaeologists Émile Chassinat and Charles Palanque, all used Tombs III and IV as the base of operations for their excavations on Gebel Asyut al-Gharbi (Kahl 2007a: 30–33; cf. the picture in D'Amicone 2009: 40–41). They ate and slept in the tombs and stored their findings there. Accordingly, the cleaning of Shaft 1 in Tomb III revealed numerous 'leftovers' from the Italian and French archaeologists: not only cigarette

boxes, wine labels, papers, and newspaper clippings, but also, for example, 1,200 fragments of *ushabtis* that surely did not originate from Tomb III. As a consequence of its use as a base camp, it has to be expected that findings from different tombs on Gebel Asyut al-Gharbi were brought there before a decision was made whether the artifacts were to be sent to Europe or to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, or whether they were simply to be left in the tomb, like the *ushabti* fragments.

Although we may justifiably assume that some of the findings from Tomb III do in fact stem from this burial site, a great many other findings certainly cannot be associated with this tomb originally. Unfortunately, it is frequently impossible to ascertain which scenario is the case. This also holds true for the post-Christian findings that are my main concern here. It is not possible to determine with certainty in every individual case that they originally derive from Tomb III.

The interpretation of Tombs II, III, and IV as the hermitage of St. John of Lykopolis is at the very least not called into question by the existence of findings from the fourth century AD (pottery, oil lamps, wooden figurine), even if all due caution is applied to the question of their original context of usage. In Tomb III, during the first millennium AD, the main activity of occupation started in the fourth century and lasted through the whole period, but it looks as if the greatest intensity of occupation took place between the fifth and the seventh century (that is, after St. John's death).

As a consequence of the identification of Tombs II, III, and IV as the hermitage of St. John, a cross-cultural continuity in relation to the veneration of saints becomes evident: as already mentioned, the owners of Tombs III and IV (or possibly of the neighboring Tomb V), Iti-ibi and Khety, were venerated as saints in the second millennium BC. Their tomb inscriptions formed part of the cultural memory of ancient Egypt as late as the second century AD, as findings of papyri in Tebtynis in the Fayoum attest (Osing 1998; Kahl 1999; Kahl 2012). The tombs with their function as memorial sites for ancient Egyptian saints also served as memorial sites for a Christian saint, and the fact that Dayr al-Meitin was constructed in close vicinity to Tombs II, III, and IV in the fifth century AD, that is, immediately after the death of St. John, is unlikely to be a coincidence.