

GEBEL ASYUT AL-GHARBI IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM AD

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Asyut in Middle Egypt has been a regional centre from as early as Dynasty 6 (Kahl 2007a). The city was a centre of Christianity in the First Millennium AD. As an episcopal see, its history is associated with Bishop Meletius at the beginning of the 4th century AD and Bishop Constantine at the turn of the 6th and 7th centuries AD (Timm 1984, 235–51). The city was also home to St John of Lycopolis in the 4th century AD.

The ancient city is almost completely lost under the strata of the alluvial plain, which is in turn covered by the rapidly growing modern city. Accordingly, archaeological evidence for the First Millennium AD city of Asyut is scarce. Columns dating back to early Christian times can occasionally be encountered in the cellars of houses in the historic centre at a depth of approximately 5m (**Pl. 1**). The location of these columns is identical to that of the temple of the god Wepwawet from the pharaonic period at a depth of approximately 8m, suggesting continuity in the sacred landscape (**Fig. 1**; Gabra 1931; Kahl 2007a, 42–44).

In contrast to the city itself, the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi (**Pl. 2**), a limestone mountain located to the west of Asyut at the edge of the Libyan Desert, provides far more information on ancient Asyut (Kahl 2007a, 59–106). The mountain rises to a height of up to 200m 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. Christian anchorites—St John of Lycopolis (4th century AD) the most famous among them—lived on the mountain during the First Millennium AD (**Fig. 2**) and monasteries were erected on Gebel Asyut al-gharbi soon afterwards; Deir el-Meitin and Deir el-Azzam are especially noteworthy examples.

The Asyut Project

The German-Egyptian Asyut Project, a joint mission of the Freie Universität Berlin, the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz and Suhag University, has conducted fieldwork at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi since 2003

(El-Khadragy and Kahl 2004; Kahl 2007a; Kahl et al. 2012). Not only pharaonic, but also Christian and Islamic, structures have been studied so far. Three objectives of the campaign, which is funded as a long-term project supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, deserve to be mentioned in particular:

1. The documentation of individual architectonic structures (e.g., tombs and monasteries), inscriptions, decoration and finds recovered at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi. This objective is at times tantamount to a salvage mission, as the mountain was badly afflicted by the mining of limestone in the 18th and 19th centuries, to the point that it now resembles a skeleton flayed of skin and flesh. Approximately 10 to 15m of the Gebel have been removed with explosives or by other means all the way from its base up to its apex on the side of the mountain facing Asyut.
2. The identification of the several functions the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi has fulfilled, and the examination of the changes these functions underwent over the centuries. The mountain has been used as a necropolis and as a quarry. It has provided accommodation, served as the destination of school excursions and as a site of prayer. In addition to this, it has housed monasteries and military installations.
3. Finally, the information gathered from and about Gebel Asyut al-gharbi is to provide new and improved knowledge on the archaeologically inaccessible city. In this context, the specific regional characteristics of Asyut are of particular importance.

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

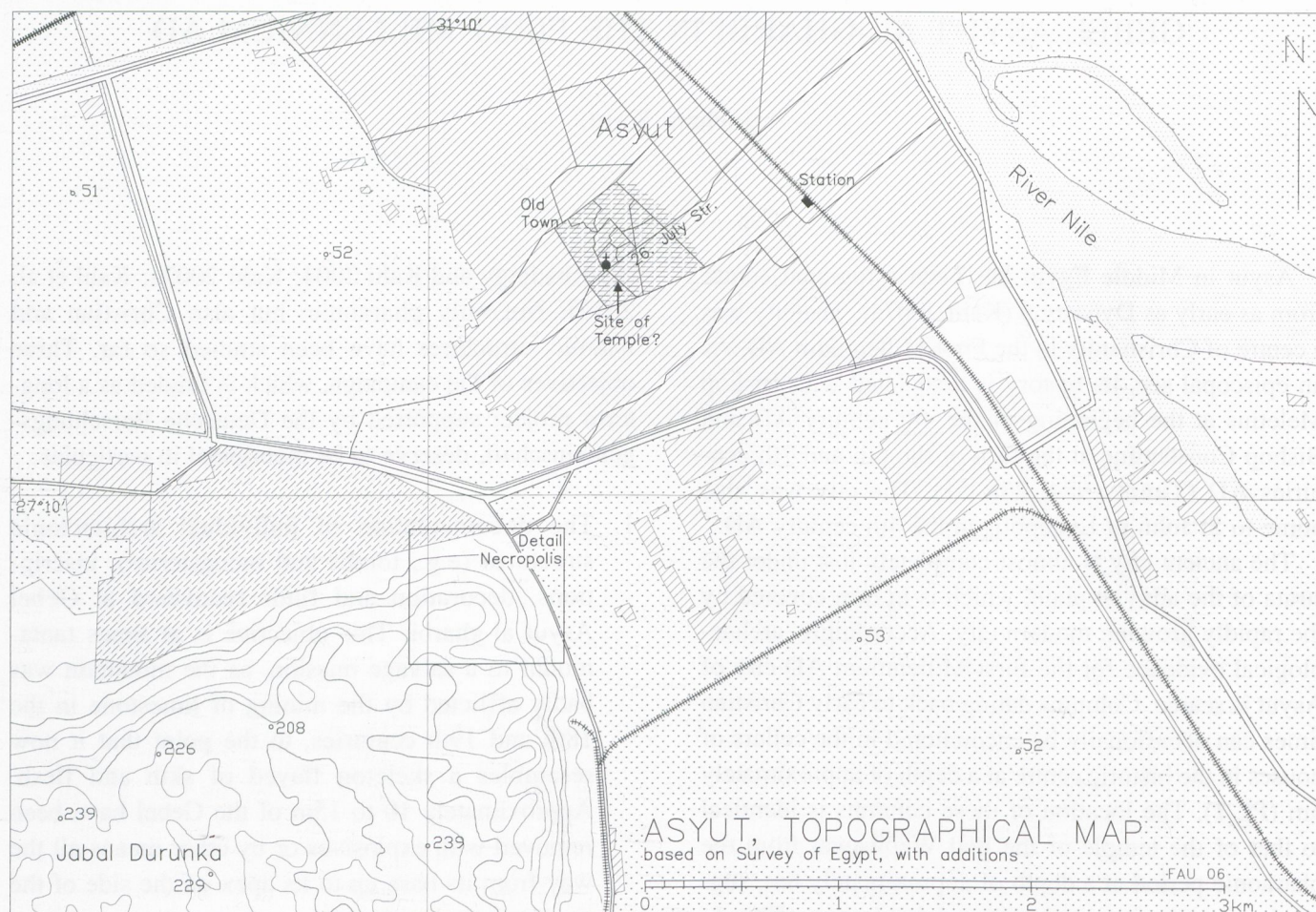


Fig. 1: Map of Asyut (© Ulrike Fauerbach, The Asyut Project).

of the Middle Kingdom (approximately 2160–1900 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 600m² (Kahl 2007a, 74–77); Tomb II from the early Middle Kingdom features an inner hall with a height of over 12m (Kahl 2007a, 85–86). Some of the proprietors of the tombs were posthumously venerated as saints (Kahl 2012), e.g., Djefai-Hapi I (the owner of Tomb I), Iti-ibi (the owner of Tomb III) and Khety II or Khety I (the owners of Tomb IV and Tomb V, respectively). Besides these large tombs, more than 1,000 smaller burial sites were hewn into the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi, giving the mountain the appearance of a honeycomb.

During the Late Period, at the latest in the 7th century BC, an additional large tomb was constructed below Tombs III, IV and V. It served as a burial place for sacred animals, especially canids—that is, dogs,

jackals and foxes—for centuries up to the Roman period (Kahl 2009; Kitagawa 2009).

The landscape of Gebel Asyut al-gharbi was already subject to great changes in pharaonic times as the result of the construction of new tombs, the abandonment of some areas of the mountain and its use as a quarry. A further major alteration of the appearance of the gebel occurred by the 5th century AD, at the latest.

Christian Gebel Asyut al-gharbi

In the Christian era, Gebel Asyut al-gharbi was used by Christians for habitation, burial and religious practice. Anchorites used the numerous rock-cut tombs as cells or dwellings (Kahl 2007a, 71–72). The walls of the tombs, originally decorated with ancient Egyptian images and hieroglyphs, were covered with a rough mud plaster (e.g., in Tomb IV), and occasionally white-washed and decorated with inscriptions and paintings. Today, most of the Christian wall decoration has



Fig. 2: Gebel Asyut al-gharbi in the First Millennium AD (© Cornelia Goerlich, The Asyut Project).

perished. The destruction took place especially during the 19th and 20th centuries, when substantial losses occurred. Christians also installed their cemeteries in the ancient necropolis. Excavations carried out around 1900 revealed that the corpses were often buried side by side in pits hewn into bedrock, separated only by a thin wall of rock. Some bodies were laid to rest in simple coffins; others were wrapped in mats made of reed stalks or palm fibre; yet others were placed on a bed of straw with the head resting on a pillow (Maspero 1900, 113–14; De Bock 1901, 88–91). Christians also erected at least two monasteries in the ancient necropolis: Deir el-Meitin and Deir el-Azzam, both of which were abandoned during the 15th century AD at the latest (see below).

Deir el-Azzam

Deir el-Azzam ('The Monastery of the Bones') is situated on top of the mountain plateau (Maspero 1900; Kahl 2007a, 99–102). According to old excavation reports, the monastery was surrounded by an irregular wall, which contained a church and a keep, as well as a few less significant monastic residential buildings (Grossmann 1991, 810). The complex of buildings also featured a water reservoir. At the end of the 19th century, parts of the mud-brick buildings were still two storeys high. Some burials could be detected inside the church (Maspero 1900, 110). A cemetery of about 1,400 tombs surrounded the complex on three sides outside the wall (Maspero 1900, 115). If Deir el-Azzam is identical with the 'Monastery of Seven Mountains' mentioned by al-Maqrizi (Wüstenfeld 1845, 102), it was raided and destroyed in AD 1418. Its remains suffered further destruction through heavy rainfall in the second half of the 20th century (personal communication with local ghafirs). Today, a ruin is all that is left of this monastery. A 2009 survey conducted by Ina Eichner and Thomas Beckh identified sherds of Late Roman Amphorae 1 (LR1), which suggest that this area was inhabited at some point between the 5th and the 7th century AD (Eichner and Beckh 2010, 207).

Kom el-Shuqafa

The mountain plateau is home not only to the ruins of this monastery, but also to a large area called Kom el-Shuqafa with Christian tombs and graves (the 2012 survey uncovered six Christian burials), kilns and thick layers of Late Roman and so-called Coptic pottery. On

the plateau, to the southeast of Deir el-Azzam, sherds of Egyptian type A amphorae recovered during the 2009 survey point to a settlement before the 6th century AD (Eichner and Beckh 2010, 207–208).

Deir el-Meitin

According to Chassinat and Palanque (1911, 3), the name of this monastery can be translated as 'The Monastery of the Dead'; it is also called Deir el-Muttin or Deir el-Mazall (Timm 1984, 756–58). Al-Maqrizi (d. AD 1441) reported that, although it was already abandoned in his time, an annual festival was still celebrated there (Kahl 2007a, 100). Today, only ruins of sun-dried brick are still visible, some of them two storeys high. The remains of the monastery have suffered severe damage during the last hundred years, not only through illicit excavation, but also through the official French excavations in this area of Gebel Asyut, as no documentation of the Christian remains was undertaken at the time (Clédat 1908, 214–15; Chassinat and Palanque 1911, 3, note 1).

The monastery's sun-dried mud-brick ruins are situated on the southern part of the mountain above the tomb of Djefai-Hapi I on geological step 5 (Pl. 3). Pottery from the area around the remaining architectural structures can be dated to between the 5th and the 7th century AD (Eichner and Beckh 2010, 208). The monastery was surrounded by a cemetery (Maspero 1900, 111), which is now completely devastated. Two fragmentary Coptic funerary stelae recovered in Tomb V (S11/st924) and the Tomb of the Dogs (S11/st686) in 2011 appear to be connected to Deir el-Meitin.

J11.3 and G10.1

The name Deir el-Meitin or Deir el-Muttin also refers to a cluster of Christian ruins situated on the northwestern part of the mountain (Clédat 1908, 214; Timm 1984, 757; Coquin and Martin 1991a, 842). Among others, the remains of two Christian chapels inserted into pharaonic tombs can still be found there today. These chapels were already documented a hundred years ago (Clédat 1908). Like the monastery, the chapels were demolished in the last century.

The first chapel (J11.3) is located about halfway up the mountain, close to its median. It is divided into three rooms (Kahl 2007a, 104–105). The walls display several wall paintings and graffiti, perhaps dating back to the 6th or 7th century (Clédat 1908, 217–21; Mein-

ardus 1965, 283). A Coptic text of eleven lines refers to St Luke the Evangelist (Lefebvre 1909, 50–55). Only a small part of the painting is still preserved today.

The second chapel (G10.1) had two rooms, the first of which is now destroyed (Kahl 2007a, 105–106). The decoration of the second room is badly damaged. Several wall paintings once adorned this room. One of them represented an angel carrying a medallion of Christ. In his left hand, Christ held a book with the inscriptions ‘The Light’ and ‘The Life’ (Clédat 1908, 221–23; Meinardus 1965, 283).

Additional evidence of Christian occupation

Based on the assumption that at least the higher steps (5–11) of the mountain were covered with Christian installations, one can imagine that the appearance of the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages was completely different from today. The report of the scholars of the French Expedition (1799) gives an idea of how many Christian remains were lost during the last two centuries:

Other rock-cut tombs have served as refuges for the first Christians of this country. On the walls of some of these are to be seen the figures of saints—drawn and painted in the worst taste. Some of the ancient tombs have also been inhabited by local people, who, as a consequence, have appropriated, removed and covered over—in effect have effaced—all traces of the ancient religion of the country (*Description de l'Égypte*, as quoted in Russell 2001, 311).

With one other exception (see Tomb IV, below), no figural Christian wall paintings are visible today in pharaonic tombs, apart from the remains described in the chapels J11.3 and G10.1 as well as those from a destroyed chapel to the south of Tomb II. Sometimes all that remains are small fragments of the plastered wall painted with the names of saints, e.g., in Tomb O13.2 or in the New Kingdom quarry O15.1. In 1823 the Italian mineralogist Giambattista Brocchi saw Coptic inscriptions in Tomb II. He could read the names of the saints Paul, Antony, Enoch, Elias and Michael. Today, these inscriptions are lost:

Passai poscia a visitare un' altra caverna egualmente spaziosa ed ornata di geroglifici; ma il vestibolo fu affatto rovinato per trarre pietre da calce. Nello stanzone interno eranvi tre colonne tagliate nella roccia, costituenti il soffitto, ma sono esse stesse distrutte, talchè non rimane che il capitello assai maltrattato che pende dal soffitto stesso.

Nella parete alla destra veggonsi parecchie iscrizioni greche-cristiane scritte a caratteri rossi. Incominciano tutte col Monogramma di Cristo. Ho letto in una le seguenti parole: ΑΠΑ ΠΑΥΛΟΣ ΑΠΑ ΑΝΤΩΝΙΟC in due righe separate; ed in un' altra ΑΠΑ ΕΝΩΧ ΑΠΑ ΕΛΙΑC; altrove in caratteri neri stava scritto ΜΙΧΑΗΛ (Brocchi 1841, 292).

Occasionally, the research carried out by the Asyut Project recovered archaeological evidence pointing towards human settlements on the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi, for example a dwelling from the 6th or 7th century AD situated below the Tomb of the Dogs (O11.23) (Prell 2011, 197).

In this context, the foundation walls of a mud-brick building (‘Byzantine building’) in the northwest of the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi must be described as well. Separated by a wadi from the main area of the gebel, the building measures 13.90m in length and 8.60m in width. According to observations made by Ina Eichner and Thomas Beckh in 2009, other buildings originally surrounded the so-called Byzantine building. Based on finds of pottery (Aswan fineware as well as Egyptian red slip and white slip ware), the building can be dated between the 4th/5th and the 8th century AD (Eichner and Beckh 2010, 208).

Tombs II, III and IV

Tombs IV, III (Pl. 4, Fig. 3) and II (Pl. 5, Fig. 4) deserve particular attention because their architecture underwent major alterations in Late Antiquity (Fig. 5). The tombs are situated on the southeastern part of the mountain on stage 6. They are rock-cut tombs and were built for the nomarchs Iti-ibi (Tomb III) and Khety II (Tomb IV) during the First Intermediate Period and for the nomarch Djefai-Hapi II (Tomb II) during the early Middle Kingdom (for the tombs in general, see Kahl 2007a, 74–79; El-Khadragy 2008; Becker 2012). After two tombs (N12.3 and N12.4) had been driven horizontally into the rock face between Tombs III and IV in the pharaonic period, the tombs were put to a different use in Christian times: the existing cavities of later pharaonic tombs between Tombs III and IV were enlarged to construct a passageway that now connects the two tombs (Pl. 6). The passageway is approximately 2m high, making it possible for a man to traverse it effortlessly in an upright position.

Furthermore, the Asyut Project was able to determine the presence of several floor layers in Tombs III and IV. More than a dozen layers of clay or plaster can

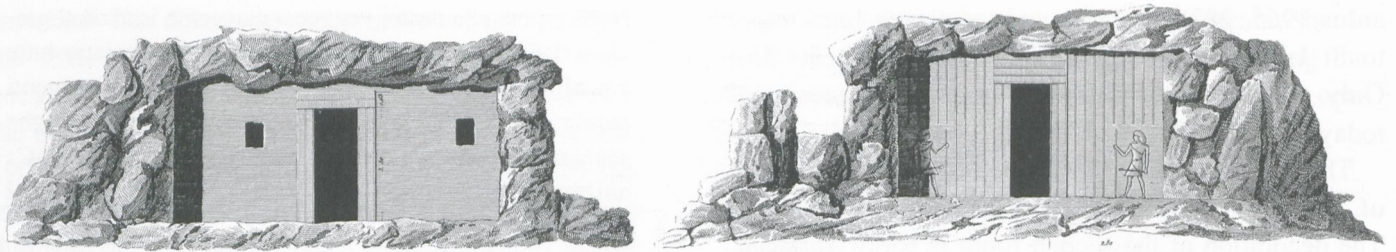


Fig. 3: Asyut. Tomb III (left) and Tomb IV (right) in 1799 (Jomard 1820–30, A. IV, pl. 48.10, 48.4).

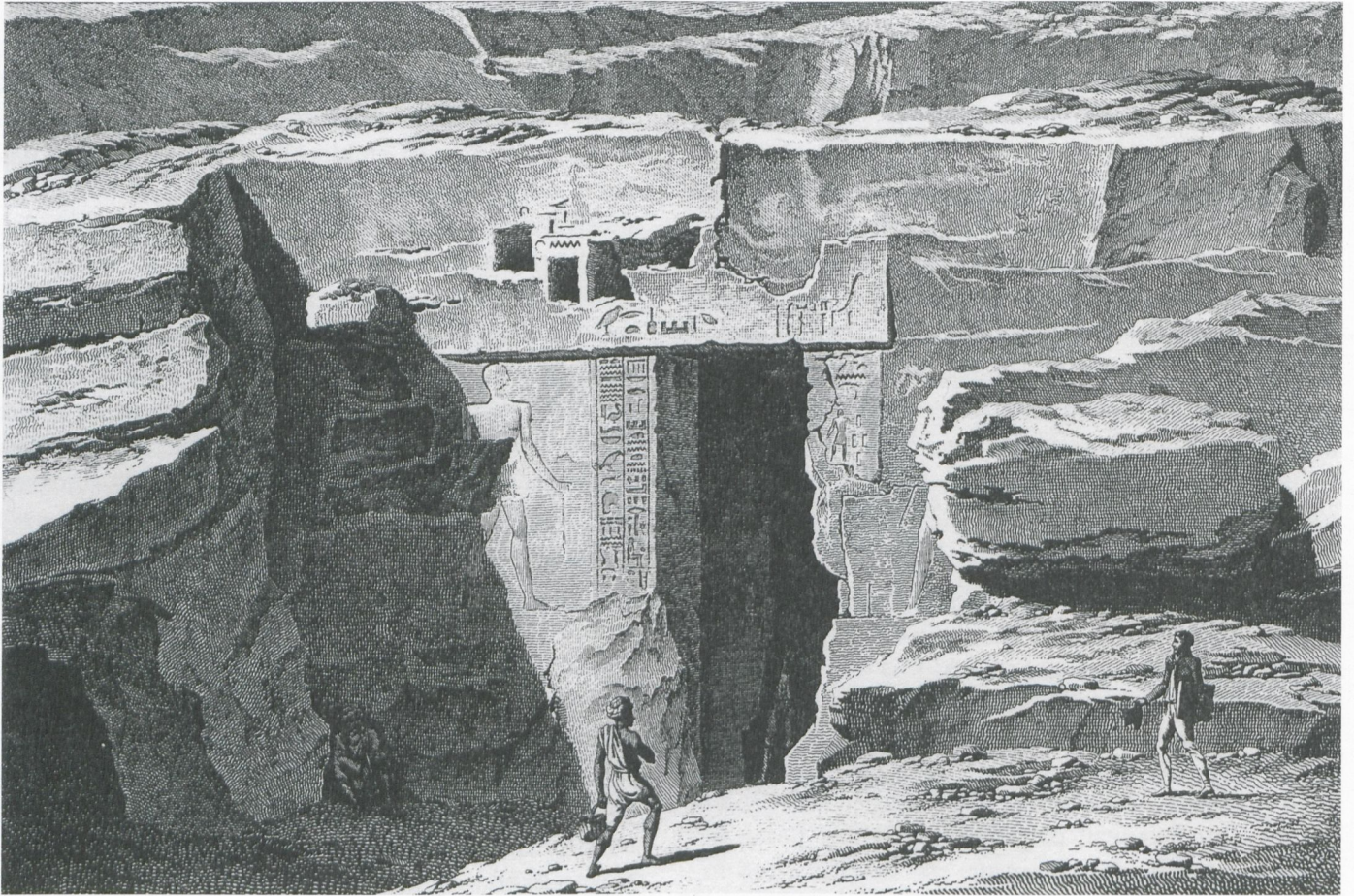


Fig. 4: Asyut. Tomb II in 1799 (Jomard 1820–30, A. IV, pl. 46.10).

be found in Tomb IV. In Tomb III, parts of a floor with a low, bench-like elevation remain (Pl. 7). Among other things, the floor features a small, round recess that was probably intended to accommodate a vessel. Both tombs exhibit niches in the walls.

In Tomb III, three relatively large and roundly shaped niches (niches 3–5) are hewn into the rear wall of the tomb (Fig. 6); they start at ground level and reach a height of between 1.5 and 2.5m, tapering progressively in relation to how deeply they are carved into the wall (Pl. 8). One of the niches (niche 5) leads to a low-ceilinged passageway, which connects

Tomb III with the quarry N13.2 that joins Tomb II to the north. Another niche (niche 3) in Tomb III has replaced the false door niche from the First Intermediate Period. Moreover, additional small niches are hewn into the wall above ground level in Tombs III and IV. The walls of Tomb III are demonstrably covered with plaster and/or clay, so that the original pharaonic period decoration of the walls is no longer visible.

Remains of a figural ceiling painting are extant in the entrance area of the inner hall of Tomb IV (Pl. 9). This constitutes the other exception mentioned above. The remains show a bust portrait of a male figure

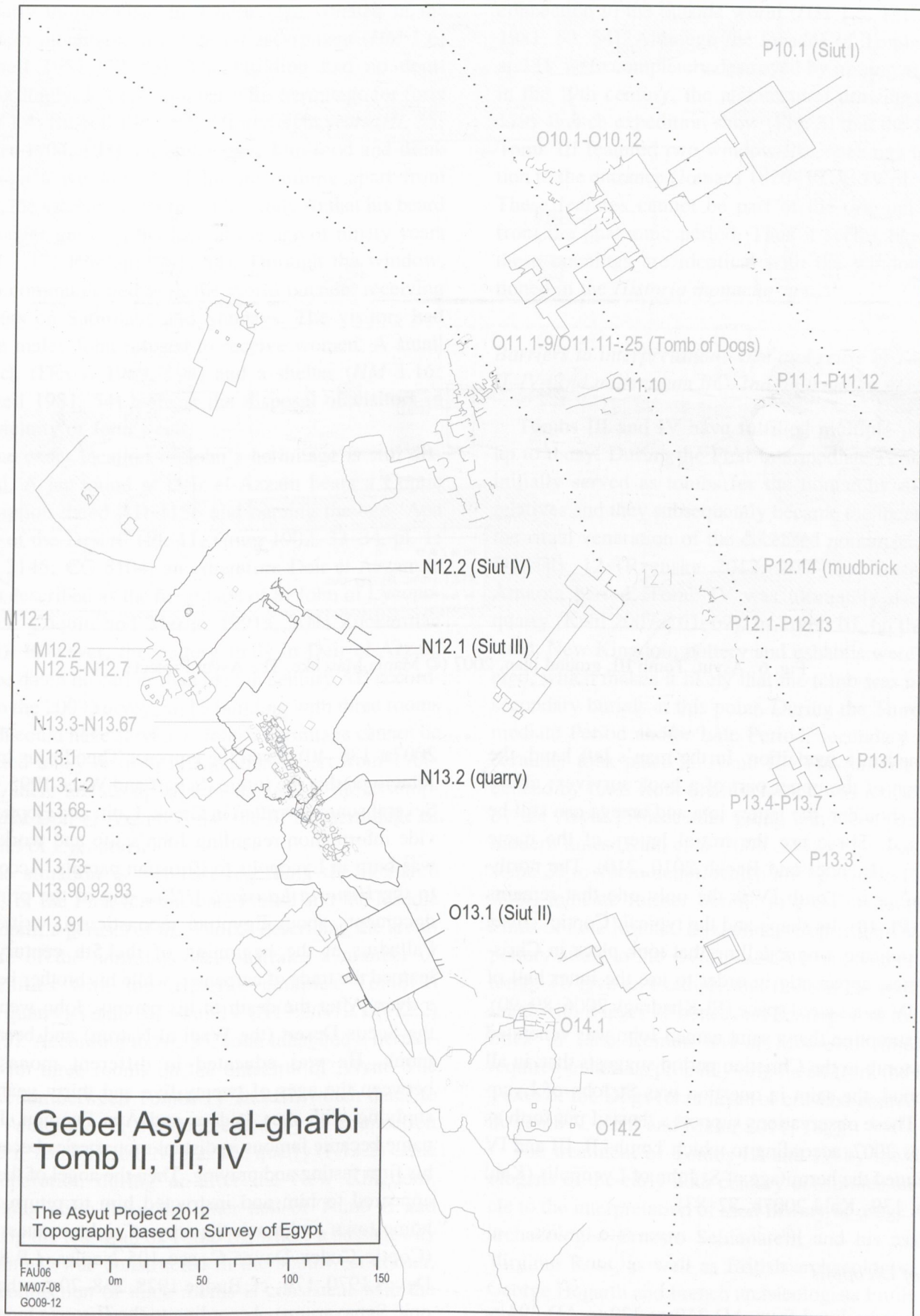


Fig. 5: The proposed hermitage of St John of Lycopolis (Asyut, Tomb II, III, IV; © Cornelia Goerlich, The Asyut Project).



Fig. 6: Asyut. Tomb III, ground plan, 2007 (© Manja Maschke, The Asyut Project).

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 *Ἰωάννης* (Eichner and Beckh 2010, 210). The north-west pillar of Tomb IV is the only one that remains today (Pl. 10). Its shape and the typical 'Coptic' chisel traces indicate a remodelling that took place in Christian times, apparently in order to use 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 that, in all likelihood, the saint in question was St John of Lycopolis. 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 Lycopolis (Kahl 2007a, 139; Kahl 2007b, 82–83).

John of Lycopolis

John, who lived from AD 310 or 320 to AD 394 or 395, was an ascetic and recluse famous for his abilities as a seer, prophet and healer (Luisier 2004; Kahl

2007a, 138–40). Even the emperor Theodosius trusted John to predict the 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 Lycopolis to Christian parents. According to the *Historia Lausiaca* (HL)—one of the principal documents about Egyptian monasticism, written by Palladius at the beginning of the 5th century—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 years old, studying with Apa Isidore 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 home town and teach the way of righteousness there (Coptic Codex Devos C, see 105 Naples, I.B.8 398; Devos 1970, 179; cf. Budge 1928, 268–70 for the Ethiopic Synaxarium). According to the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* (HM), John consequently returned to Asyut, where he lived in accordance with the principles

of early monasticism in a hermitage situated in the western mountain on the desert escarpment (*HM* 1.6; Russell 1981, 52–53). The building had no door. Accordingly, John did not leave his hermitage for forty (*HM* 1.4; Russell 1981, 52) or forty-eight years (*HL* 35; Butler 1904, 105). Disciples gave him food and drink through a window. 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 (*HM* 1.17; Russell 1981, 54). 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 1969, 194) and a shelter (*HM* 1.16; Russell 1981, 54) were at the disposal of visitors in the vicinity of John's cell.

The exact location of John's hermitage is still disputed. A jar found at Deir el-Azzam bears a Coptic inscription dated AD 1156 and naming the site 'Apa John of the Desert' (Pl. 11; Crum 1902, 33–34, pl. 1; Jd'E 3145; CG 8104) and therefore Deir el-Azzam is often described as the hermitage of St John of Lycopolis (cf. Coquin and Martin 1991a, 809; Zuckerman 1995). However, the pottery finds in Deir el-Azzam can be dated no earlier than the 5th century AD according to the 2009 survey, and a building with three rooms which could have served as John's hermitage cannot be detected today or in the excavation report from 1900. Thus, there are strong arguments against the assumption that Deir el-Azzam is the site of the hermitage of St John of Lycopolis.

The situation is different regarding the nomarch tombs of the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom; a perusal of the sources describing the architecture of the hermitage demonstrates a number of congruities with the tripartite complex Tomb II (later quarry)/Tomb III/Tomb IV (N13.2/N12.1/N12.2) (Fig. 5). According to *HL* 35, John inhabited a hermitage with three rooms on the outskirts of Asyut. The connection between Tombs IV and III, which dates to Late Antiquity, is complemented by a connection between Tomb III and N13.2. The quarry (N13.2) came into operation during or after the New Kingdom, stretching north from the inner hall of Tomb II and reaching the rear wall of Tomb III, where a passageway to Tomb II was constructed in the southwest corner. This connection of three rooms is consistent with the description in the *Historia Lausiaca*.

According to the *Historia monachorum*, a window situated in the wall of St John's hermitage served as a

connection to the outside world (*HM* 1.5, 15; Russell 1981, 52, 54). Although the façades of Tombs II, III and IV were completely destroyed by mining activities in the 19th century, the architectural drawings of the 1799 French expedition show (Fig. 3) that the front of Tomb III featured two window-like openings in addition to the entrance (Jomard 1820–30, A. IV pl. 48.10). These features cannot be part of the original design from the pharaonic period. Thus it seems likely that these openings are identical with the window mentioned in the *Historia monachorum*.

Barriers to interpretation: Use and reuse of Tombs II–IV (2nd millennium BC–2nd millennium AD)

Tombs III and IV have fulfilled multiple purposes up to today. During the First Intermediate Period they initially served as tombs for the nomarchs and their relatives and they subsequently became the location for the ritual veneration of the deceased nomarchs during Dynasty 12 (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, New Kingdom pottery and ushabtis 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 finds from Shaft 4, which was rediscovered by the Asyut Project after going unnoticed since pre-modern times (Kahl et al. 2006, 243). Only recesses of some 20 to 40cm depth, which are hewn into the rock floor, indicate further burials in pre-Christian times. Finds of Late Roman, Byzantine, 'Coptic' and Mamluk pottery attest to the vivid post-Christian history of the tomb. To give an example, the floor of the tombs was lined with a layer of bones and bandages 50 to 100cm thick in Late Roman and/or Medieval times. The required materials probably originated from the nearby Tomb of the Dogs (cf. a layer of crushed animal bones in Tomb V, Kahl and Malur 2011, 182).

The treatment of Tombs III and IV by the archaeologists of the early 20th century constitutes an obstacle to the interpretation of their history of usage. Italian archaeologist Ernesto Schiaparelli and his assistant, Virginio Rosa, as well as British archaeologist David George Hogarth and 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; see the picture in

D'Amicone 2009, 40–41). They ate and slept in the tombs and stored their finds there. Accordingly, cleaning of Shaft 1 in Tomb III revealed numerous 'leftovers' by the Italian and French archaeologists: cigarette boxes, wine labels, papers, newspaper clippings and also, for example, 1,200 fragments of ushabtis, which surely did not originate from Tomb III. As a consequence of Tomb III's use as a base camp, it is to be expected that finds from diverse tombs on the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi were brought there before a decision was made whether the artefacts were to be sent to Europe or 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 finds from Tomb III in fact originate from this burial site, a great many of other finds 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 finds from the First Millennium AD. Not in every individual case is it possible to determine with certainty that they originally derive from Tomb III.

The interpretation of Tombs II, III and IV as the hermitage of St John of Lycopolis is at the very least not called into question by the existence of finds from the 4th century AD, even if all due caution is applied to the question of their original context of usage. Fragments of pottery vessels have to be mentioned here. A 4th-century AD occupation of Tombs II, III and IV is also suggested by small oil lamps and, from Tomb IV, the 8cm-high wooden figurine of a man (Pl. 12, S04/192; Kahl et al. 2005, 163; for the dating of similar figurines see Rutschowskaya 1986, 83–85), whose original, removable phallus is no longer extant. From Tomb III, a sherd of North African red slip ware (Pl. 13, S05/003) with a depiction of Christ in high relief and a Latin inscription deserves particular attention as well. In Tomb III, during the First Millennium

AD, the main activity of occupation started in the 4th century AD and lasted over the whole period, but it looks as if the culmination of occupation took place at some point between the 5th and the 7th century AD, i.e., after St John's death.

Conclusion

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 neighbouring Tomb V), Iti-ibi and Khety, were venerated as saints in the 2nd millennium BC. Their tomb inscriptions formed part of the cultural memory of ancient Egypt as late as the 2nd century AD, as finds of papyri in Tebtynis in Fayum 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 Deir el-Meitin was constructed in close proximity to Tombs II, III and IV in or after the 5th century AD (Eichner and Beckh 2010, 207–208), i.e., after the death of St John, is unlikely to be a coincidence.

Nine seasons of fieldwork on Gebel Asyut al-gharbi have established that the architectonic remains of the First Millennium AD have largely been destroyed. Inscriptions and paintings have almost completely perished as well. On the other hand, some finds—especially large amounts of pottery—do exist, and the interaction of all existing evidence can still yield new research results.

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¹ Cf. internal report on post-pharaonic pottery from Asyut by Edyta Klimaszewska-Drabot, 2010.

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