

The Asyut Project: fieldwork season 2004

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with an appendix by Ulrike Fauerbach
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Abstract

The second season of fieldwork at the necropolis of Asyut gave a clearer picture of the Siutian nomarchs' tombs from the First Intermediate Period and the early Middle Kingdom. The joint mission of the Universities of Mainz, Sohag and Münster cleared up the architecture and several phases of utilization of Tomb III and IV, documented the decoration of the Northern Soldiers-Tomb and started making facsimiles in Tomb I. In addition, late antique columns originally belonging to a sacral building and stemming from the ancient town were identified.

The ancient necropolis of the Middle Egyptian town Asyut is situated on the west bank of the Nile in the western mountains. The mountain ridge peaks at over 200 metres above sea level. The necropolis extends over several kilometres along the cultivated land (pl. 12.1). Several hundred, presumably more than a thousand tombs were hewn into the mountain, making it look strikingly similar to a honeycomb. Stone quarrying, tomb robbery, graffiti, excrements of bats and pigeons, unprofessionally performed excavations and the forces of nature in form of rainfall and earthquakes have all but lead to the tombs being nearly destroyed.

Although several expeditions are known to have conducted excavations there, most of the archaeological work carried out in the necropolis has remained unpublished. The last major expeditions ended 90 years ago.² Neither a map of the necropolis nor facsimiles of the tomb decoration were drawn, nor was the architecture recorded. A mere handful of plans and drawings in the „Description de l’Egypte“ are the only exception. Islamic terrorism and a military base on site rendered research in Asyut a nigh impossible matter in the last few decades.

However, progress been made. Thanks to the kindness of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, especially Dr. Zahi Hawass and Mr. Magdy El-Ghandour, as well as to the support of the General Director of Middle Egypt, Mr. Samir Anis Salib and the inspector general at Asyut, Mr. Hani Sadek Metri, and also because of the good cooperation with the

¹ We would like to thank Mr. John Daly for his advice regarding English.

² É. Chassinat/Ch. Palanque 1902–03, E. Schiaparelli 1905–1913, D.G. Hogarth 1906–07, A. Bey Kamal 1913–14.

local military and police, a first³ and a second season of fieldwork were conducted in September 2003 and from August –September 2004.

This year members of the joint mission were the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität (Mainz, Germany), the South Valley University of Sohag (Egypt) and the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster (Germany). The local inspector, Mr. Rageh Darwish Khalaf, accompanied us. This season was financed by the Universities of Mainz (fieldwork) and Münster (restoration work).⁴

Last year's work resulted in a sketch of the necropolis, which shows the relation between the necropolis and the modern city.⁵ This preliminary map of the necropolis was extended last season with an accuracy of up to three meters on average (fig. 1). The most significant archaeological remains were included: Tomb I of Djefaihapi I. from the time of Sesostris I.; Tomb II of Djefaihapi II. from Dynasty 12; Tombs III, IV and V from the First Intermediate Period; the Northern Soldiers-Tomb from the beginning of the Middle Kingdom; and the Coptic monasteries Deir el-Meitin and Deir el-Azzam.

Tomb III was built for the nomarch *Iti-ib=i* during the First Intermediate Period. Some remains of the front, which was the victim of stone quarrying in the 19th century, were able to be detected. The inner hall consisted of two rows of two pillars, traces of which still exist. Furthermore, traces of the decoration are still visible.⁶ This year we were able to document the architecture of Tomb III by utilizing modern surveying techniques (cf. fig. 2 and the appendix by Ulrike Fauerbach). Three shafts are cut into the rock floor of the inner hall. The easternmost, shaft 1, was cleaned this season. Apart from its mere existence, no information about this shaft has been published until now.⁷ The shaft is 6,30 m deep and its base leads to an undecorated burial chamber in the south. On the western side the chamber aligns with the wall of the shaft, however it becomes broader in width to its eastern side. It is 1,36 m high. The shaft was already excavated respectively plundered and then refilled. Some modern remains like papers of Palanque and Schiaparelli as well as pottery from the Late Period and Coptic and Islamic Periods give evidence of this. Not only these remains, but also fragments of several hundreds of ushabtis stemming from different periods in the uppermost layer of the shaft show its modern function as a deposit for finds – presumably coming from the whole necropolis – which were deemed to be without value, unspectacular and thus didn't seem worth to be taken away by the early 20th century archaeologists.

³ M. El-Khadragy/J. Kahl, in: SAK 32, 2004, 233–243.

⁴ We wish to thank the authorities of these universities deeply for their support.

⁵ El-Khadragy/Kahl, op.cit., 236, fig. 1.

⁶ Cf. El-Khadragy/Kahl, op.cit., 236–239.

⁷ Commission des monuments d'Égypte, Description de l'Égypte ou recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'armée française. Tome Quatrième. Antiquités: planches, 1817, pl. 48.9.

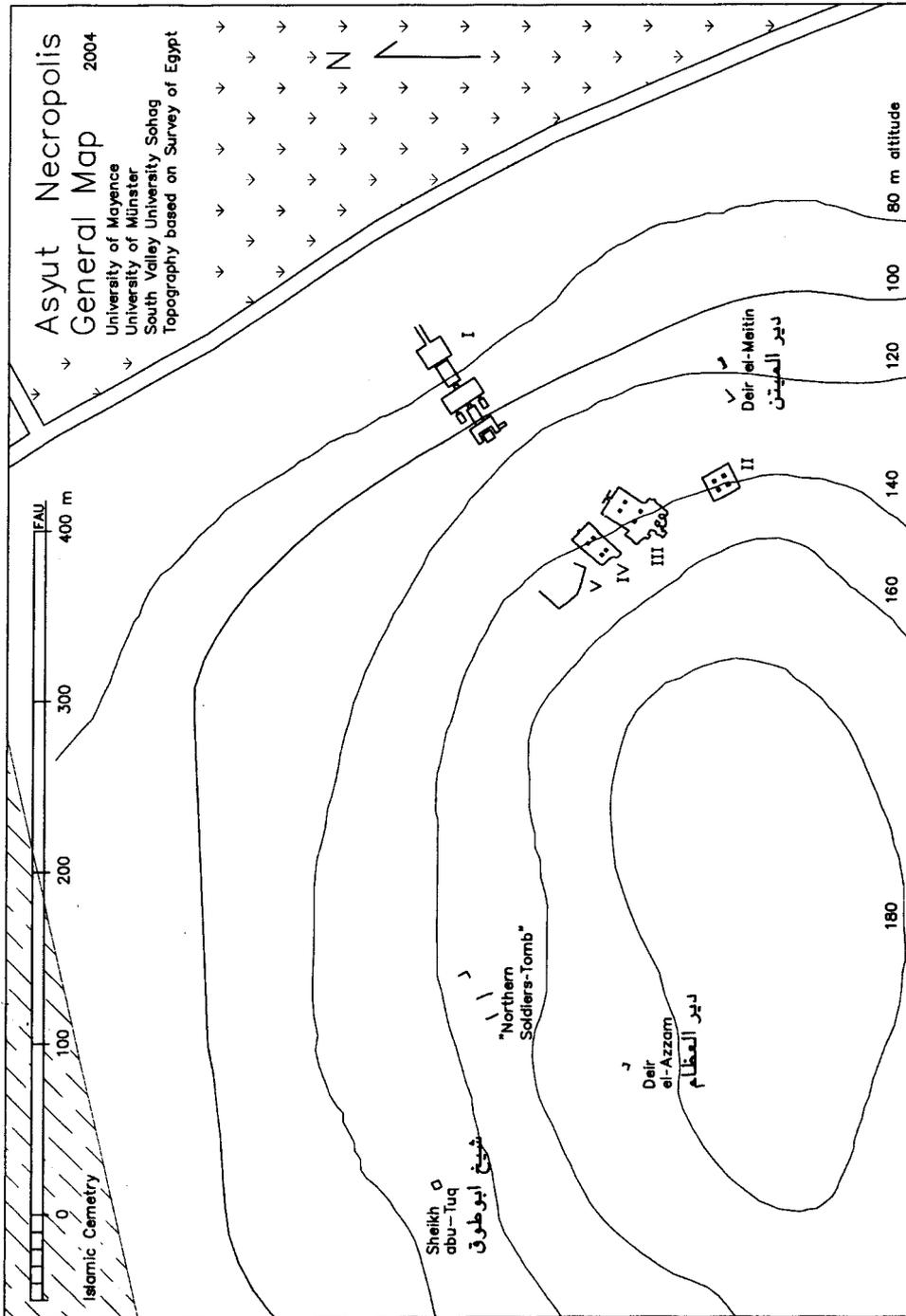


Fig. 1: Map of the necropolis (U. Fauerbach)

On the bottom of shaft 1 an eye made of alabaster (S 04/135) was found, which originally was inlaid on the eastern side of a rectangular FIP/MK coffin.⁸ It is highly probable that this eye belonged to the coffin of the person buried here. Niches in the western wall of the hall, as well as remains of a plastered floor in the hall and in front of the tomb, show that Tomb III was reused in late antiquity.

In the inner hall five layers of plaster were detected. The First Intermediate Period wall paintings were covered with a blue colored plaster. Above this, there were layers of mud and of white painted plaster. Longitudinal benches and a round bench were uncovered in front of the tomb. The last one of these benches resembled those found in a refectory.

Among the objects found in the inner hall a coffin fragment displaying a part of a diagonal star clock deserves being mentioned (S 04/195; pl. 12.2). The preserved star is painted in a light blue color, which is typical for Asyut. The vertical strokes are reddish brown, whilst the hieroglyphs are black, except for traces of light blue color. The decans *hr.i-ib-wd3* and *mdd/šsm.w* are mentioned.⁹ Especially the writing of *mdd/šsm.w* resembles writings found on different coffins originating from Asyut¹⁰, which form a special tradition in the textual history of decan lists.¹¹

This season Tomb IV, the tomb of *Hty* II., was cleaned, except for the easternmost part of the inner hall and the front. Several observations already made in the year before indicated that work within the tomb had suddenly been suspended.

This season's fieldwork caused tomb IV to gradually take on its original shape. The floor, covering a layer of bones, reed, bandages and small objects, had entirely been a Coptic installation. The layer was fifty to one hundred centimeters thick, a wooden phallic figure comparable to those found in Elephantine and Edfu (pl. 13.1)¹² lying amongst it. Having removed the floor in most parts of the tomb (pl. 13.2), it became obvious that there were two shafts in the southern part, which had not yet been mentioned in egyptological literature. We will see next season if these shafts were finished and whether there were burials.

In a rectangular niche hewn into the southern wall of Tomb IV we found limestone-reliefs, parts of statuettes and pottery fragments from the late 18th Dynasty and the Ramesside Period, Coptic and early Arabic ostraca as well as other objects. Presumably the British archaeologist David George Hogarth or the French Egyptologist Charles Palanque

⁸ Cf. CG 28118 and 28119 (coffins of Mesehti), CG 28128 (coffin of Nakhti) and A. Lucas/J.R. Harris, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries*, 1962, 107–117.

⁹ Cf. O. Neugebauer/R.A. Parker, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts I*, 1960, 24; C. Leitz, *Altägyptische Sternuhren*, OLA 62, 1995, 90.

¹⁰ Cf. e.g. S 11 C (Cairo, JE 44978): Neugebauer/Parker, *op.cit.*, 1, 20–21, pls. 22–23, 27.

¹¹ J. Kahl, in: SAK 20, 1993, 95–107; J. Kahl, *Siut – Theben: Zur Wertschätzung von Traditionen im Alten Ägypten*, PÄ 13, 1999, 201–205.

¹² Cf. M.-H. Rutschowskaya, *Catalogue des bois de l'Égypte copte*, 1986, 83–85.

used the niche as a depository for objects gathered in the necropolis.¹³ Since no New Kingdom tomb has been located in its original position in the necropolis up until now the objects from the depository certainly are of interest.

The Northern Soldiers-Tomb: According to the report of Jollois and Devilliers in the „Description de l’Egypte“ Tomb IV was the only tomb decorated with a scene showing marching soldiers. Sometimes, however, ancient reports or notes give a hint towards the existence of at least one other tomb decorated with marching soldiers.¹⁴ Diana Magee discovered during a short visit to Asyut the remains of such a tomb in 1986.¹⁵ But she couldn’t reconstruct the ground plan and couldn’t assign the tomb to a specific owner.

In 2003 we were able to relocate this tomb. Only a part of the southern wall of the Inner Hall is still standing in situ. The northern wall has been broken down and only some of its remains are accessible. Also the roof with a weight of several tons has collapsed and buried the rest of the tomb. The ground plan of this tomb seems to be similar to those of tomb III and IV, as the characteristic projection on the southern wall indicates. The southern wall is nearly 14 meters long and shows several scenes. All scenes are painted on plaster and are exposed to rain, daily sun light and graffiti, threatening their existence. The wall paintings were cleaned and the plaster was consolidated by the local restorers Khaled Gomaa Sayed and Gamal Abd el-Malek Abd el-Moneim. Four rows of marching soldiers armed with axes and shields are depicted (pl. 14.1). The soldiers are shown carrying shields made of cowhide, cheetah skin and antelope skin. Wrestlers and an unusual scene showing the goddess Hathor also are part of the wall decoration.

Due to its decoration and its architecture, the tomb can be dated in direct proximity to Tomb IV. The decoration (wrestlers and soldiers) points to a nomarch as tomb owner.

Tomb I: For a longer period the Egyptian army occupied the tomb of *Dḥ=i-hꜥpi* I. (pl. 14.2), who was the Siutian nomarch during the reign of Sesostri I. It is accessible again since a few years. Contrary to other rumors its condition doesn’t seem to have been worsened by the occupation. Excrements of bats and pigeons however do have a worsening and destructive effect on the tomb decoration. An iron net was therefore installed above the modern entrance in this season to hinder these animals from nesting in the tomb.

Despite its importance the tomb has not yet been adequately documented till now. The only existing ground plan is that of the „Description de l’Egypte“, which is incorrect in many regards.¹⁶ The plan only shows the part of the tomb preserved today in the mountain.

¹³ Cf. D.P. Ryan, *The archaeological excavations of David George Hogarth at Asyut, Egypt*, 1988, 59 and É. Chassinat/Ch. Palanque, *Une campagne de fouilles dans la nécropole d’Assiout*, MIFAO 24, 1911, 2.

¹⁴ *Description Ant. IV, Textes*, 146–147; H. W. V. Stuart, *Nile Gleanings concerning the ethnology, history and art of Ancient Egypt as revealed by Egyptian paintings and bas-reliefs*, 1879, 93; notes on a photography of tomb IV by H. W. Müller.

¹⁵ D. Magee, *Asyut to the End of the Middle Kingdom: a historical and cultural study II*, 1988, 36–38.

¹⁶ *Description Ant. IV*, pl. 44.

This part alone already measures more than 50 meters in length. Some of the chambers are more than 11 meters high.

Several walls covered with paintings of very fine quality have not yet been reported on up until now¹⁷ and will be documented in the course of the next seasons. In addition, we were able to make out the remnants of more architectural elements and a causeway, which have not yet been included in a ground plan.

At least two monasteries were erected in the ancient necropolis during the Coptic Period: Deir el-Meitin and Deir el-Azzam. Tombs of the whole necropolis were used as cells by Coptic anchorites and as dwellings in later periods, in addition to the monasteries.

Deir el-Azzam, „The Monastery of Bones“ is situated on the mountain plateau. A ruin is all that is left of this monastery today (pl. 15.1). If it is identical with the „Monastery of Seven Mountains“ mentioned by al-Maqrizi¹⁸ then it was destroyed in AD 1418 by a raid. Its remains suffered further destruction through the hands of the Egyptian army in the late 1960s.¹⁹ The mountain plateau is not only home to the ruins of this monastery, but also to a large area with kilns and huge layers of Coptic pottery called Kom el-Shukafa.

Deir el-Meitin: Following the name given by Chassinat and Palanque in their publication on Middle Kingdom tombs at Asyut²⁰ the name of this monastery can be translated as „The Monastery of The Dead“. But it is also called Deir al-Muttin²¹ or Deir al-Mazall²². Al-Maqrizi (who died AD 1441) mentioned also this monastery and reported that it was already deserted during his time. However, an annual festival was still celebrated there. Today, only some ruins of sun-dried brick are visible. The remains of the monastery have suffered during the last 100 years, as did some cells as well, in the surrounding area. Nevertheless the area between the ruins of Deir el-Meitin still visible today and the Northern Soldiers-Tomb supplies a lot of evidence for a dense Coptic settlement in the necropolis.

As of yet, no archaeological remains of the ancient town of Asyut have come to light. Fragments of a Ramesside temple, however, were found in the 1930s during an illicit excavation conducted in a Siutian house by its owner.²³ These fragments were presumably part of the Wepwawet-temple.

Some years ago in Abu el-Gemal street, close to this house and next to the church Alwet el-Nasara (which means „Mound of the Copts“) late antique columns were brought to light during the construction of another building.²⁴

¹⁷ The only exception is W.S. Smith, in: MDAIK 15, 1957, 221–224.

¹⁸ F. Wüstenfeld, *Macrizi's Geschichte der Copten*, 1845, reprint 1979, 102.

¹⁹ P. Grossmann, in: A.S. Atiya (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia* 3, 1991, 809–810.

²⁰ Chassinat/Palanque, *op.cit.*, 3.

²¹ R.-G. Coquin/M. Martin, in: A.S. Atiya (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia* 3, 1991, 842–843.

²² S. Timm, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten in arabischer Zeit*, Teil 2, BTAVO, Reihe B, Nr. 41/2, 1984, 756–758.

²³ S. Gabra, in: CdE 6, 1931, 237–243.

²⁴ We would like to thank Inspector Mahmoud Osman for his kind information and cooperation.

Today, one of these columns is stored in the magazine of the local inspectorate at Shutb (pl. 15.2), whereas five others are still in situ. These columns might have belonged to a sacral building. Thus, there seems to have been continuous building of ancient temples and churches on this particular site in Asyut.

With these finds we have strong evidence for the location of one of the ancient temples of Asyut in the area around the church Alwet el-Nasara, which is situated on a raised area in the center of the city. It is very attractive to assume that not only a late antique sacral building and the New Kingdom Wepwawet-temple but also the Middle Kingdom temple for Wepwawet (which is known by inscriptional evidence²⁵) had already been erected at this particular place.

Appendix by Ulrike Fauerbach: The building survey in tomb III

The building survey in tomb III was done with the help of a totalstation Leica TCR 405power and the data transmitted directly to a laptop by the program TachyCAD. In this way the measured drawing could be executed immediately and on the spot in AutoCAD. As the tomb will continued to be cleared, the ground plan published here (fig. 2) is preliminary. Additionally, the surveying of two sections was commenced. The compasses in the drawings of the tombs give two north directions. The main compass points to geographical north, the shorter one denotes the north in our description. This is roughly the direction the Nile is running (northwest), for the tombs are obviously oriented towards the river.

Tomb III (fig. 2), the southernmost of the three tombs, Siut III–V, from the First Intermediate Period, is also the largest, with a size of about 600 m². Its façade and entrance, roughly documented in the „Description de l'Égypte“²⁶, are nowadays largely destroyed. Two pairs of pillars divide the inner hall of the rock cut tomb in three sections, which differ in width and height. The first section behind the entrance measures 18,35 m x 7,65 m (138,80 m²) and is 4,65 m high. At the border to the second section the floor level rises to about 15 cm and walls project 24 cm (north) / 31 cm (south). This 11,65 m deep section is framed by the pairs of pillars. The outline of the ceiling gave the impression of being carried by the architraves linking the pillars in north-southern direction. This was indeed an illusion, for the pillars and architraves are almost completely destroyed, however the ceiling is still able to carry itself. The third part is 10,15 m deep and about 6 m broader than the others. It was masoned quite roughly, and was probably left unfinished. It is dominated by many niches, the majority of which are obviously of Coptic origin. A central niche with a trapezoidal form which was enlarged at a later date seems to be the only part of the tomb belonging to its original design. The tomb's total depth excluding the niche measures 29,45 m.

²⁵ E.g. Siut I, 273, 277, 290.

²⁶ Description Ant. IV, pl. 48, 9–11.

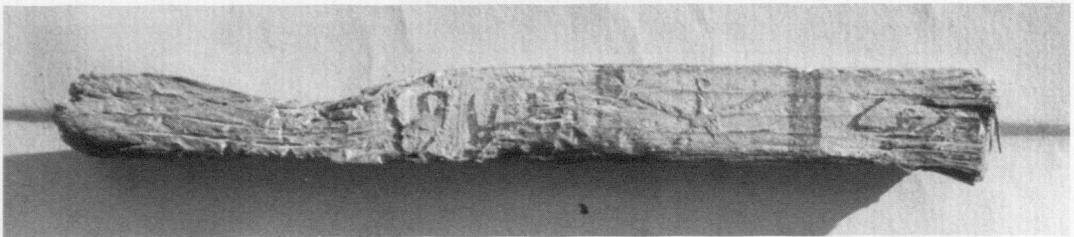
After the use of the structure as a tomb had been given up, the design was altered several times. The northern wall of the first section was broken through in order to give access to tomb IV. Both tombs have since formed as a whole. The breakthrough destroyed a part of the autobiographical inscription.

Fire must have been made in the rear of the tomb, for the walls and ceiling are sooty. The walls were later painted in a pale blue. Thereinafter, a layer of mud-plaster was applied on the walls and painted white. Soot, color and plaster cover also the niches in the third section of the inner hall.

The floor was covered with up to four layers of mud-plaster. In the middle section of the tomb a fifth layer consisting of a white polished plaster, probably based on lime, was added, which measured between 1–1,5 cm in thickness. This plaster was repaired in one place at the least. It was also applied to the stump of the southeastern pillar, which proves that the support was destroyed beforehand. The plaster also covers a narrow east-west-orientated bench, which is more of a screen than something to sit on. The lime-plastered structures in the forecourt of the tomb probably belong to the same period.



Northern part of the necropolis with Deir el-Azzam and Sheikh Abu-Tuq



Coffin fragment with part of a diagonal star clock (S 04/195)



Phallic figure (phallus not preserved)



Tomb IV, inner hall



Northern Soldiers-Tomb, southern wall: marching soldiers armed with shields and axes



Tomb I



Deir el-Azzam



Late antique columns found in Asyut