Asyut Guardian City

Few cities can claim as long and illustrious a history as Asyut, in Middle Egypt. Continuously inhabited for at least five thousand years, it ranks among the world’s oldest urban centres, yet only now has Asyut begun to receive the scholarly and public attention it deserves. The ‘guardian city’ straddled the border between Upper and Lower Egypt, defending the frontier, and was often the decisive battlefield in ancient power struggles. Despite the conflict, the Asyut region was a trade emporium and cultural hub, where countless works of art were conceived and replicated for millennia. Recent collaborative, multifaceted fieldwork projects underway in the Asyut necropolis, the neighbouring village of Shub and nearby Manqabad have shed new light on this once neglected region. Presenting both fieldwork findings and insights gained from the study of Asyut’s material culture preserved in museums and institutions, this publication aims to share an appreciation of Asyut’s outstanding achievements with readers around the world.

Front cover image: South-facing view of the alluvial plain from the Western Mountain, 2014, Iiona Regulski.
Asyut: Guardian City

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Few cities can claim as long and illustrious a history as Asyut, in Middle Egypt. Continuously inhabited for at least five thousand years, it ranks among the world’s oldest urban centres. The earliest known religious corpus, the Pyramid Texts (c.2350-2100 bc), speak of Asyut as the place where Isis and Nephthys watched over the body of Osiris while it awaited mummification. From around 2500 bc, Asyut was recognized as the capital of the 13th Upper Egyptian nome (province), whose vast expanses of fertile farmland helped nourish the country and added to its wealth throughout history.

Situated on the Nile’s west bank almost precisely equidistant (c.360 kilometres) from the capitals of Lower and Upper Egypt, the ancients called Asyut ‘the guardian’ (sioot) a name suitable to its role as protector of the border between these rival realms (fig. 1). Despite being caught in the middle of a number of disruptive conflicts, Asyut was known in antiquity as a centre of art and literature. The first major destination of caravans arriving from the southern kingdoms of what is now Sudan, it was a vibrant trade emporium, a place of interaction and exchange, not only of goods but beliefs and ideas.

The birthplace of notable leaders and thinkers in its early history, modern Asyut has likewise produced prominent religious and political figures (including former president Gamal Abdel Nasser) whose visions helped shape the nation. Home to the first institute of higher learning in Upper Egypt (Asyut University, est. 1957), it remains the capital of the Asyut
Governorate. Asyut’s importance to Egypt’s cultural development is indisputable, and the city and region are now receiving the scholarly attention they have long deserved thanks to the cooperation and assistance of Egypt’s Ministry of Antiquities.

In 2003, Jochem Kahl, then of the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität (Münster, Germany) and colleagues from Sohag University (Egypt) began a survey of the Asyut necropolis, in the Western Mountain on the city’s outskirts (fig. 2). Members of a joint project of the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz (Germany), the University of Sohag (2004-present), and the Free University of Berlin (2010-present), have since been mapping and documenting...
the architecture and decoration of tombs spanning three thousand years, in addition to the ruins of Coptic monasteries, the remains of Christian cemeteries and the scars left by quarrying that began in antiquity. The aim of the Asyut Project’s large multi-disciplinary and international team is to compose a complete picture of the mountain’s use over time, broadening our knowledge of the region’s history and achievements.

The British Museum Asyut Region Survey that started in March 2016 complements the German-Egyptian mission while expanding the field of inquiry beyond the Western Mountain. Investigations of smaller settlements near Asyut provide insights into the interactions of these ancient towns (fig. 3). The British team has lately focused on Shuth (Shashotep), Asyut’s closest neighbour, the 4000 year-old former capital of the much smaller 11th Upper Egyptian nome. Tracking history from the deep past to the present moment, the project involves town residents in the rediscovery and preservation of their cultural heritage.

Fig. 3: Map of the Asyut region, c.1799, Description de l’Égypte. Carte topographique de l’Égypte, plate 12 (Paris, 1818).
In July, 2017, experts gathered for the Annual Egyptology Colloquium at the British Museum (“Asyut through Time: Conflict and Culture in Middle Egypt”), presenting the results of recent fieldwork and discussing their findings. Topics included ancient caravans, military campaigns, mummified animal cemeteries, unusual burial customs, intricate wooden models, papyrus archives of family histories, ancient graffiti, a Roman army installation repurposed as a Coptic monastery and modern vernacular architecture.

Presentations described current methodologies, including geophysical surveys and the art of pottery classification. Other papers outlined historic archaeological explorations of Asyut, the region’s economic development in recent centuries and its extensive material legacy, examples of which may be admired in museum collections in Egypt and worldwide.

To make this body of work accessible to a wider audience of readers who love Egypt, papers presented at the colloquium were summarized in short essays as the basis for this book. Rather than a comprehensive history or academic treatise, the intention is to illustrate varied facets of Asyut’s special character. Thanks to the efforts of the contributing authors, the city’s ancient name has taken on fresh meaning. As research continues to improve our understanding, this book celebrates Asyut as the guardian of Egypt’s cultural memory, a city and region whose far-reaching influence has only begun to be revealed.

Understanding Egypt

The realization that Egypt’s history extended thousands of years into the past stirred growing controversy in the mid-18th and early 19th century, throwing the western world into an uproar. The pyramids, temples and tombs offered proof that the human endeavor was far longer and more accomplished than previously suspected. The desire to verify the age of these imposing monuments (not to mention the events described in the Christian Bible) made Egypt the greatest source of curiosity imaginable, a place where many believed the answers to every question regarding human origins could be found.

The team of 167 engineers, cartographers, scholars and artists that Napoleon brought to Egypt in 1798 recorded so much information that they ran out of pencils and had to melt bullets to obtain fresh lead. Their illustrations, published in the 22-volume Description de l’Égypte (1810-1822) ignited ‘egyptomania,’ a fascination with the country that would soon bring thousands of tourists and adventurers from around the world. Along with the written accounts of earlier travellers and historians, the Description helped inspire explorations at sites around Egypt in the 1800s, when the discipline of archaeology was still young (fig. 4).

While the remains of ancient settlements that lay beneath modern cities were often inaccessible to study, cemeteries proved to be inexhaustible sources of
information about life in ancient Egypt. Aside from containing burial goods (like statues, wooden models, painted coffins and papyrus documents) tombs were typically decorated with scenes of daily activities and inscribed with the owner’s biography. Considering the quantity of potential finds and the amount of information they offered regarding individuals, societies and religious beliefs, burial places became important sites for exploration.

**Historic explorations**

Asyut’s necropolis is in the Western Mountain (Gebel Asyut al-Gharbi) on the edge of the desert that stretches across Africa. Rising to a height of up to 200 metres with a base around a kilometre long, the mountain’s features were sculpted by manmade and natural forces over time. Tombs were plundered throughout antiquity, sometimes re-used as burial places by later generations and later still as refuges for Christian monks; Coptic churches, monasteries and cemeteries were also added to the necropolis.

In addition to torrential rains and earthquakes, the quarrying that began in antiquity and continued sporadically throughout the centuries left clefts in the cliff face causing damage to the tombs, sometimes burying them in mounds of rubble. Some early excavations ill-advisedly used explosives, likewise resulting in damage and debris.

Egyptologists at work today in and around Asyut nonetheless owe much to the efforts of late-19th and early 20th century explorers, who recorded aspects of the sites that have long since vanished. Francis Llewellyn Griffith (1862-1934)

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*Fig. 4: “One Egyptian tomb at Lycopolis”, one of four studies for Plate 33 of Dominique Vivant Denon’s Voyage in Lower and Upper Egypt during the Campaigns of General Bonaparte (Paris, 1802). (BM 1836,0109,38.b)*
of Great Britain was the first Egyptologist to investigate the rock-cut tombs of the Western Mountain. In 1888, while clinging to a wooden ladder, he copied inscriptions covering walls over 10 meters high in the tombs of Asyut's nomarchs (governors) (fig. 5). His work, published the following year, is considered an invaluable record of these monuments. Percy Newberry (1869-1945), also British, visited Asyut briefly in 1893, copying texts and making sketches of the tombs.

Little is known of Egyptian Mohammed Halfawee who reportedly excavated in Asyut's necropolis in 1889 when Eugène Grébaut was director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, nor were his findings published. Likewise those of Farag Ismail who with Yasser Tadros explored the ruins of the Coptic monastery Deir al-Azzam, also located in the necropolis, in 1897.

Fig. 5: Francis Llewellyn Griffith's copies of hieroglyphic inscriptions from tombs in the Western Mountain and Deir Rifheh, 1886-7, Griffith Institute, University of Oxford.
By the close of the 19th century, Egypt was under exploration by individuals of many nationalities anxious to acquire items for study and display in their countries’ museums. But amid the excitement of rediscovery, the realization was dawning that artefacts themselves do not enhance our knowledge, only the careful processing of information gained from them and the surroundings, or context, in which they were found.

In 1903 Charles Palanque (1865-1909) carried out excavations for the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology, unearthing twenty-six tombs, all but five of which were found wonderfully intact. The Institute’s director, Émile Gaston Chassinat (1868-1948), published Palanque’s work, including the Tomb of Chancellor Nakhti. A prominent citizen of Asyut who lived at the end of the First Intermediate Period, Nakhti’s burial chambers contained the greatest cache of funerary furniture and equipment unearthed in Asyut’s necropolis, both in terms of quantity and quality (fig. 6). These extraordinary objects were housed in the Egyptian Museum of Cairo and the Louvre Museum of Paris.

Outside of Egypt, the largest group of artefacts from Asyut is in the Turin Museum (Italy, est. 1824), a prized feature of one of the finest, most complete
representations of ancient Egyptian culture, assembled largely through the efforts of Egyptologist Ernesto Schiaparelli (1856-1928; fig. 7). Born in 1856 in a village near Turin, Schiaparelli completed his studies at Turin University in 1877 and spent two years in Paris at the Collège de France as a student of French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero (1848-1916), later head of the Egyptian Antiquities Service and director of the Cairo Museum [1881-86, 1899-1914].

Schiaparelli, who visited Egypt for the first time in 1885, had a special fondness for Asyut. As founder of Italy’s National Association for the Assistance of Italian Missionaries Abroad (est.1886) he helped establish a girls’ school in Asyut managed by Franciscan nuns. Appointed the director of the Turin Museum in 1894, Schiaparelli set about the task of filling in the gaps in the Egyptian collection, so that it might present examples of all types of objects from throughout the dynastic era.

In 1901, as was common at the time, the museum acquired some 1500 objects at antiquities markets in Egypt and transported them to Italy. Schiaparelli soon realized that this was not the best way to enrich the collection, considering both the high costs and the lack of provenance and context data for most of the objects. Schiaparelli considered it more beneficial for the Turin Museum to excavate in Egypt, since according to the Egyptian Antiquities Service’s regulations in those years, export permits were granted for around half of the recovered objects, with Egypt retaining the balance.

Having gained several years of experience at Giza, Heliopolis and Luxor, Schiaparelli began exploring sites in Middle Egypt including Ashmunein, Qau el-Kebir and Asyut. His strong rapport with the people of Asyut probably helped facilitate the large-scale investigations ever conducted in the Western Mountain.

The Italian Archaeological Mission started work at Asyut in 1906, setting up camp (fig. 8) on the cliff-face terrace of the necropolis. One of the tombs was outfitted to serve as the camp’s kitchen while several others became storage spaces for the mission’s numerous finds. In the course of seven seasons of fieldwork (1906-1913) Schiaparelli’s team uncovered over three thousand artefacts currently in the Turin Museum. But soon after the work began, Schiaparelli and their team had company.
Fig. 8: The tents of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Egypt in Asyut near the tomb of Khety II (N122), c.1906-1913, Museo Egizio Turin Archive. (C1089)

Sir Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge (1857-1934), then Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum (1894-1924), had reached same conclusions as Schiaparelli. He too wished to fill chronological gaps in the British collection and, recognizing the importance of first-hand information regarding the provenance and context of archaeological finds, he set the British Museum's Egyptian excavations in motion.

Budge wrote to Gaston Maspero, director of the Egyptians Antiquities Service in Cairo, requesting permission to excavate. Maspero suggested that Budge explore a portion of the Western Mountain comprising tombs dating to the
First Intermediate Period (c.2205-2020 BC), a time-frame of special interest to Budge, who soon dispatched archaeologist David George Hogarth (1862-1927) to start the work (fig. 9).

Since Schiaparelli was already assigned the south-eastern portion of the necropolis, he and Hogarth had to split the territory, drawing an imaginary line up the mountain with Schiaparelli excavating to the east and Hogarth to the west. The British mission lasted only several months (December 1906 - March 1907) and Hogarth did not publish his findings. He did however compile a detailed fieldwork archive including letters, reports, a notebook and a diary that along with the seven hundred or so artefacts allotted to him during the division of the finds (fig. 10), is currently under study at the British Museum.

Around the same time (1906), British archaeologist Flinders Petrie began exploring the necropolis of Deir Rifeh in the Durunka Mountains west of Shashotep (now Shubta), another provincial capital, five kilometers south of Asyut. Although not as well-preserved as Asyut’s necropolis, Deir Rifeh yielded exceptional finds now housed in many museum collections.

In 1913, Ahmed Pasha Kamal (1851-1923), Egypt’s first Egyptologist, excavated in Asyut on behalf of a private collector, Sayed Bey Khashaba. Secretary-interpreter for the Antiquities Service and later a curator for the Egyptian Museum, Kamal published lists of the recovered items, but aside from a small group gifted to Asyut’s Coptic School where it is still on display, the Khashaba collection has been dispersed worldwide.

Archaeological work stopped with the outbreak of World War One and only resumed in the mid-1920s, when British Egyptologist Gerald Avery Wainwright cleared portions of two tombs in the Western Mountain. Subsequent missions conducted by Egyptian, American and British archaeologists were brief and...
produced a handful of publications. In the early 1960s the Western Mountain became a military base, greatly reducing archaeologists’ access and the site was largely ignored for over forty years.

**Asyut studies revived**

While researchers once competed for permission to explore promising sites and to enhance their museum’s collections, our knowledge of Egypt’s past is now advanced through collaborative efforts such as those ongoing in Asyut. Working concurrently, the German-Egyptian and British projects exchange information as well as team members in order to produce as complete and accurate a body of work as possible. A steady stream of fresh finds – sometimes of a type or nature as yet unknown in Egyptology – has significantly increased and consolidated our knowledge of ancient Asyut.
The German-Egyptian project team has spent over fifteen years compiling a survey that will serve researchers and their students for generations to come. The comprehensive picture of Asyut now emerging is based on extensive fieldwork and the rediscovery of tombs and other structures, the first mapping of the Western Mountain (fig. 11), the documentation of architecture, inscriptions, artefacts and bones using modern techniques, in addition to the consolidation of written accounts from early travellers and explorers.

The British Museum team is meanwhile advancing a new fieldwork model to address the reality of places like Shutb, which is both a multilayered archaeological site and a thriving town whose growth may threaten its material heritage. Another aspect of the project is focused on the British Museum’s Asyut collection, including many of the items from Hogarth’s explorations that have yet to be dated, or their exact provenance and meaning established (fig. 12). By cross-referencing information from Hogarth’s field notes with tomb numbers marked on the objects, and by matching the artefacts with items of similar types and style from other museums and recent finds, their provenance may be identified and their original contexts reconstructed.

Fig. 11: South-facing view of the alluvial plain from the Western Mountain, 2014, Ilona Regulski.
Although they are based in museums and institutions around the world, the archaeologists and philologists behind these multifaceted field and research projects have the same goal in mind: to enhance Egypt’s historical record by sharing their understanding and appreciation of Asyut’s outstanding contributions with the world.

Fig. 12: Limestone offering-table with hieroglyphic text discovered by Hogarth in 1907, British Museum. (BM EA976)

REFERENCES
Asyut, Guardian of Memory
Asyut’s wealth was derived from the Nile, whose annual floods carpeted the region with rich silt and guaranteed at least one big harvest of grains per year in addition to pulse, roots, vegetables, and fodder for a variety of domesticated animals. The fields of Asyut produced wheat in abundance, a staple of the Egyptian diet and the cornerstone of the economy since salaries were paid in rations of grain and other foodstuffs. At the edge of the verdant floodplain where the desert began its march across the continent, the kilometer-long Western Mountain (Gebel al-Gharbi) stood sentry, rising 200 meters above the horizon with the tombs of the city’s ancestors carved in its living rock (fig. 14).

Straddling the border between Upper and Lower Egypt, ‘the guardian city’ defended the frontier and was often the decisive battlefield in ancient power struggles. A center of trade and commerce, it was a port of call offering respite to desert caravans after their long trek from the Sudan. Likewise, northbound ships awaiting favorable winds to navigate a dangerous stretch of the Nile took refuge in Asyut’s harbour.

Despite the loss and destruction of intermittent war, Asyut proved its resilience, drawing strength from the land to recover and rebuild. The city meanwhile cultivated its individuality, developing singular traditions in art, architecture and religious practice, shaping, transmitting and safeguarding a cultural memory that would eventually encompass the Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Christian and
Islamic periods. Although the ancient city remains hidden beneath several millennia’s worth of alluvial deposits and urban accretions, recent excavations and studies of papyri, artefacts, tombs and their inscriptions have yielded fresh information regarding Asyut’s features and provided glimpses of its inhabitants’ daily life (fig. 15).

**A bustling capital**

The administrative center of a fertile province extending three kilometers south of the city and forty kilometers north, Asyut’s population numbered around two or three thousand in the dynastic period. Occupying the Nile’s west bank, away from the river on a slight elevation (13 meters) to escape the annual floods, it hosted temples, libraries, schools, granaries, the palaces and gardens of high functionaries and the modest mud-brick dwellings of those whose principal occupation was working the land. In addition to its importance as a place where grain was produced, stored and distributed, Asyut was situated on a major trade route, its marketplace alive with commerce fed by river-going ships and camel-mounted caravans.

Asyut’s role as an emporium and its politically strategic location between north and south engendered a strong military presence but also fostered a degree of cosmopolitanism unusual among cities of its size. It attracted merchants and royal craftsmen, travellers from Egypt’s north and south and further abroad, including representatives of the foreign forces that invaded and occupied Egypt over time, Hyksos, Kushites, Assyrians, Greeks and Romans. Christianity established a strong, early presence in Egypt (from c.200AD) and Asyut maintained a large Coptic population whose monasteries and holy sites became major pilgrimage destinations from the end of the fourth century AD.

While the ancient city’s layout has yet to be fully determined, recent studies of a family archive recording transactions dating from 181BC to 169BC have added to our knowledge. Papyrus documents inscribed with the will of Petetymis, a prominent lector priest who lived in Asyut around 200BC, lists the properties that constituted his considerable fortune, including fields, gardens, houses, offices, fountains and warehouses. The documents also described the four neighbouring sides of each of the listed parcels, shedding light on the possible location of some city landmarks (fig. 16). Asyut’s grandest building, the Temple of Wepwawet, the region’s chief deity, was probably in the city’s southwest quarter. Aside from an attested columned hall, the temple was most likely similar to others of its time, with an entry pylon, a hypostyle court, cult rooms and a shrine housing the god’s statue.

The Foundation of Wepwawet, comprising land whose revenues helped finance
the temple’s upkeep, was located nearby and probably surrounded by lush gardens offering shelter from the scorching sun. The ‘garden in the valley of Isis’ appears to have been located near the Temple of Wepwawet, as its northern neighbour abuts the temple’s entrance area. The Garden of Chaiophis, while not adjacent to the temple, was part of the Wepwawet endowment, located near a ‘mud island’ (suggesting regular inundation and/or ample irrigation) to its west.

Although once thought to adjoin the necropolis, the Temple of Thoth, god of writing and wisdom, was more likely near the Temple of Wepwawet, since the neighbour of a field owned by Petetymis in that area was a ‘feeding place for ibis’, the animal sacred to Thoth and associated with his temple. Thoth’s temple may date to the New Kingdom and was still attended by priests when Egypt was ruled by the Ptolemies, 1200 years later. The Temple of Anubis, the jackal-headed god of mummification, probably stood at the foot of the tomb-riddled Western Mountain.

One of Petetymis’s jobs was conducting funerary rituals, and the village of Pachir where he held a few properties, was likely situated between Asyut and the necropolis, his workplace. Petetymis had three magazines (storage places) and two houses in the necropolis whose neighbouring properties were identified as ‘the path of god’, an apparently important thoroughfare that may have run from the city, near the Temple of Wepwawet, through Pachir, to the necropolis. One of Petetymis’s fields, referred to as ‘the shore’ (suggesting its proximity to water) was possibly located on the north side of the necropolis, where a canal still flows as it has, perhaps, since antiquity.
Sacred city

One of the most prominent religious centers of ancient Egypt after Thebes (in the south), and Heliopolis and Memphis (in the north), Asyut’s fortunes were closely tied to the veneration of its gods since temples were centers of economic activity. Endowed with extensive land-holdings and equipped with small industries like kitchens, bakeries and workshops that served the institution’s practical and ritual needs, they provided jobs for local residents.

Asyutis worshipped deities favoured throughout Egypt in addition to some specific to their region, including the fierce goddess Hereret, associated with armed combat, and Sahet, ‘she who presides over the god’s books’. Foremost among the local gods was Wepwawet (fig. 17), whose depictions as a canid or a canid-headed man prompted the Greeks of later antiquity to call Asyut Lycopolis, ‘City of the Wolf’.

Wepwawet, whose name means ‘the opener of ways’, was a god with an aggressive edge, also known as ‘the power of the two lands.’ While Anubis, represented as a jackal, was often pictured in a seated position, Wepwawet typically stood upright upon a standard (a raised platform or pedestal; fig. 18) and was referred to in a tomb inscription as ‘the one with the sharp arrows.’ A pack of black dogs sacred to Wepwawet was probably kept within the temple enclosure, whose walls were fifteen meters high.
In Djefai-Hapi I’s time (c.1950 BC), the Wepwawet temple was overseen by a staff called the *qenbet*. The highest title was ‘overseer of priests of Wepwawet’ and other positions included ‘herald’, ‘wardrobe keeper’, ‘overseer of the magazine and ‘master of secrets’. Temple-related staff included shipbuilders, gooseherds, and musicians.

Known as ‘the sky of the one, who made the sky’, Wepwawet’s temple suffered damage during the unrest that marked the First Intermediate Period (c.2205 -2020 BC) and the outset of the 12th Dynasty (c. 1994-1781 BC). Under the patronage of Asyut’s nomarchs (governors) the temple was restored and added to; New Kingdom pharaoh Ramses III (1184-1153 BC) also had buildings raised there in his name.

Ordinary people never entered the temples, only pharaoh himself or the priests who performed the cult for the gods on the king’s behalf. But at festival time, the statue of the god was paraded through the streets, an occasion marked by dancing, drinking and feasting, with people dressed in their best clothes and draped in flower garlands.

As part of a religious festival celebrated for five days before the year’s end, Wepwawet’s statue, believed to embody the deity, was carried from the city to the home of Anubis probably at the edge of the necropolis. The Temple of Anubis, possibly founded around 2300 BC, was in use until the Christian Era.

Asyut was historically linked to Osiris whose temple, present from at least the First Intermediate Period, functioned for more than two millennia. A manual dating to the second century AD recording the myths and monuments of Upper Egyptian nomes, cites a sanctuary in Asyut called ‘House of Eight Trees’ where the fingers of Osiris were reportedly preserved as sacred relics. The manual also mentioned a statue of iron and gold depicting Horus and Seth and an obelisk somewhere in the city.

Hathor, goddess of fertility, was venerated in Asyut from the Old Kingdom (c.2731-2205 BC) to the Roman period, a span of 2700 years, her temple administered by priestesses. Evidence suggests that other gods may have had places of worship in Asyut including Maat, feminine personification of the principles of order and harmony; the ram-headed Khnum, representing the
creative force of the Nile floods; sun-gods Amun-Ra and Amun; Khonsu, ‘the traveller’ associated with the moon; Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of war; Isis, sister/wife of Osiris, and their son, the falcon-headed Horus.

Surviving adversity

The First Intermediate Period, often described as a dark period in ancient Egyptian history, began with the fall of the Old Kingdom and lasted around one hundred years (c.2205-2020 BC). With the capital of Lower Egypt, Herakleopolis, maintaining Old Kingdom traditions while Thebes, the administrative and religious center of Upper Egypt, was challenging the north by expanding aggressively; Asyut was embroiled in a twenty year war.

Allied with the Herakleopolitan kingdom, Asyut marked the edge of its northern territory, closest to the Theban enemies. The province was consequently the site of bitter battles (2063-2045 BC) that left it hungry and depopulated as men abandoned their fields to join arms. Inscriptions in the tomb of an Asyuti nomarch, Iti-ibi who lived c.2060 BC, recount the Herakleopolitan attack but his autobiographical inscriptions were left unfinished, indicating that Asyut was on the losing end of that fight.

Iti-ibi’s son Khety II, who also served as nomarch, drove the Thebans out of the province in a battle involving Herakleopolitan ships so numerous that the fleet extended for several kilometers along the Nile. “Heaven was blowing the North wind” proclaimed an inscription in Khety II’s tomb, where his efforts to repair Wepwawet’s war-torn temple are also recorded. Victory, however, was short-lived and the Theban army soon reclaimed the capital and the province.

Funerary goods in the tomb of Mesehti, an Asyut nomarch who served in the wake of the First Intermediate Period, contained wood-carved models of troops of soldiers clad in loin cloths and marching in tight formation. One model depicts forty Egyptian infantrymen wielding spears and shields; the other features forty Nubian archers, of the sort hired by nomarchs as mercenaries. Models such as these were believed to represent important features of daily life that the tomb’s owner might need in the afterlife. Their presence in Mesehti’s burial place suggests the continuity and significance of armed forces to Asyut’s survival.

The city suffered further unrest at the beginning of the 12th Dynasty, founded by Amenemhat I who usurped the throne. Although he may have been assassinated, Amenemhat I’s reign (c.1985-1955 BC) paved the way for a prosperous era referred to as the Middle Kingdom, comprising the 12th and 13th dynasties. These several centuries of relative stability ended when the Hyksos established independent rule in the eastern Nile Delta (c.1530 BC) and gradually conquered territory perhaps as far south as Thebes, creating the hundred-year-long turmoil known as the Second Intermediate Period. Now Asyut sided with Thebes against...
the intruders who pillaged the city and the Western Mountain necropolis.

In 671 BC Asyut was caught in hostilities when a provincial governor installed by Egypt’s Assyrian occupiers was forced out of office then restored to his position, only to rebel against those who appointed him. A half-millennium later under Ptolemaic rule, Asyut again became a battlefield, involved in a bloody uprising (c.195 BC) led by a Theban king who failed in his attempt to free Upper Egypt of its foreign overlords.

**Responsible leadership**

Asyut’s nomarchs ruled as minor kings, commanding authority and privilege while guiding the province through hardship and upheaval. An autobiographical inscription in the tomb of Khety I, who lived during the First Intermediate Period (c.2180-2155 BC), states: “I was rich in barley, when the land was in need. I was the one who nourished the city.” Aside from administering food supplies, governors were responsible for maintaining vital irrigation systems and for the upkeep and improvement of temples and public works throughout the province.

Asyut’s most illustrious leader was Djefai-Hapi I, depicted as tall, slender and handsome in funerary statues currently kept in the Louvre and Turin Museum (fig. 19). Calling himself ‘the offspring of Wepwawet,’ Djefai-Hapi I ruled Asyut during the 12th Dynasty reign of the pharaoh Senwosret I (c.1965 to 1920 BC), overseeing the restoration of Wepwawet’s temple and fostering the city’s growth.

Djefai-Hapi I’s rock-cut tomb (designated Tomb I/P10.1 of the necropolis) was one of the largest in Egypt belonging to a private (not royal) individual, comprising a series of rooms extending 55 meters into the mountain (fig. 20), their 11 meter-high ceilings and walls adorned with reliefs and paintings. The tomb recorded its occupant’s 50 titles and 180 adulatory epithets like “one whose lord loves his
actions” and “one whose lord caused that he be great.” Modesty, presumably, was not among a strong ruler’s attributes.

The status of Asyut’s nomarchs approached that of royalty in both matters of state and religion, with their statues considered as intermediaries to the gods. Belief held that so long as their people remained loyal and diligent, the nomarchs would intercede with the gods on their behalf.

The ancients always made special provisions for the upkeep of their burial places and the regular performance of rituals, but contracts for establishing such arrangements have only been found inscribed in Djefai-Hapi I’s tomb (though papyrus templates probably existed). These included agreements with necropolis workers, the necropolis police and the ‘overseer of the desert’ or necropolis manager.

Djefai-Hapi I left instructions for the priests of Wepwawet and Anubis to offer meat and loaves to the statue in his tomb, during the year’s end procession when Wepwawet visited Anubis, to ensure he’d be remembered as part of the popular festivities. His foresight proved effective; Djefai-Hapi I came to be viewed as a god in his own right, with a temple for his devotion. His character and achievements were so admired that parents were still naming their sons after him 1600 years after his death.
Undying art

Rather than preventing artistic production, conflict often stimulates it, as Asyut’s contributions to Egypt’s cultural memory demonstrate. Known for its schools of painting, writing and sculpting, the city set standards for art, architecture and literature that were valued for millennia. The plan of Djefai-Hapi’s tomb, for instance, inspired New Kingdom tomb construction at Thebes. By the end of First Intermediate Period, Asyut produced wooden objects now considered as the finest made in Egypt aside from Thebes.

The wooden funerary statues of Djefai-Hapi I are over two meters high, their elongated hands and body an innovative feature of Asyuti production signaling a larger-than-life elegance. The execution of these statues, including the intricately carved curls on the nomarch’s head, demanded great skill (fig. 21). Ancient manuals of Egyptian art may have cited them in much the same way as schools of modern sculpture reference the work of Renaissance masters.

Inscriptions from the tomb of Djefai-Hapi I as well as those of other nomarchs were replicated for 2000 years. Copyists made inscription patterns (drafts of tomb wall writing) on papyri that reached Thebes around 1900BC to 1460BC, between the reigns of Senwosret I and Hatshepsut. The Theban elite was swift to adopt these beautifully composed and rendered writings as a kind of status symbol, favoring them in their tombs and funerary equipment for 800 years (1460BC- 660BC).

Asyuti texts later travelled north where they were housed in a Roman Period library in Tebtunis (in the desert west of today’s Beni Suef) two thousand years after their creation. Reflecting the prestige associated with the Asyuti nomarchs, the texts were also admired for the values they conveyed of confident, just and beneficent rulers and a people loyal to their gods and king. They belonged to the classical canon of their day, hearkening to the high tradition and accomplishment of distant ancestors.

Reflection and remembrance

Viewing Egypt’s dynastic past today through the winding tunnel of time, it is easy to forget that the ancients themselves possessed a long and illustrious history. An 11th Dynasty tomb recently discovered (2005) in the Western Mountain
necropolis (Tomb N13.1) offers unique and poignant insight into how Asyutis experienced their cultural and religious heritage.

Located in the higher reaches of the Western Mountain, the tomb of governor Iti-ibi-iqer, (c.2030 BC) was filled with painted scenes of quotidian work and leisure: farming and cattle-herding, sailing and hunting. Their colours still remarkably vivid (fig. 22). But the tomb’s special contribution to our knowledge lies in the extensive scribbling scattered over its walls, left by people who frequented the tomb during the New Kingdom, some 500 to 900 years after it was built.

The 200 inscriptions and drawings that visitors made were dipinti, painted on the walls with brushes of halfa grass and carbon ink, as opposed to ‘graffiti’ which suggests scratching into a surface. The information they added is especially precious as material evidence of the New Kingdom period from Asyut remains relatively scarce.

Aside from its rich decoration and the stories recorded in its inscriptions, the tomb of Iti-ibi-iqer possessed a sweeping view of Asyut and its environs. After trekking up the Western Mountain, visitors resting in its cool interior took the opportunity to leave their mark, in the form of drawings (fig. 23) and texts, often signed by their authors. In addition to local scribes and priests of Asyuti temples, a shield bearer of pharaoh and palace scribes spent time there, suggesting that the tomb was both a popular local gathering place and a sought-after historical monument. Some came often, judging by multiple inscriptions, including “Khaemwase, son of the prophet of Wepwawet Netjermesu and the lady of the house Mesu.”
Some texts describe places in Asyut that the writers admired, like the temples of Wepwawet, Anubis, Osiris, Hathor (whose face was etched in red ink) and the deified nomarch Djefai-Hapi I, asking these places be bathed in precious incense. A finely written text (dated 1157 BC) outlines provisions for the care of sacred animals kept in Asyut’s temple enclosures and was signed by Iahmes, high priest of Wepwawet. A few texts were rendered in hieroglyphs but the bulk were written in hieratic, the handwritten script of the day. Many of the authors signed themselves “able scribe, real silent man, fair, patient.”

From time to time, the tomb may also have served as a classroom for student daytrips, a place to practice reading and writing in the company of skilled scribes. Aside from what appear to be writing exercises, parts of letters and royal titles, many of the texts added to the walls were educational, excerpted from famous works of literature. These included a Hymn to the Inundation, describing the life-giving role of the river Nile; the Prophecy of Neferty, announcing a new king after a time of unrest; The Teaching of the Vizier (minister) Kairsu, about the importance of loyalty and The Teaching of King Amenemhat, instructing his son Senwosret I on how to be a just ruler (fig. 24). Unsurprisingly there were passages from the Teaching of Khety, also known as the Satire of the Trades, that describes a variety of professions, naming ‘scribe’ the best of all.

Phrases added in the Ramesside period (1292-1077 BC) were brief and to the point: “Do good for me, god X” requesting a god’s blessing. The scribes also wrote the names of the deceased and dedicated offerings on behalf of both the tomb’s owners and themselves. Since writing and reciting names of the dead was
believed to help ensure their place in the afterlife, texts such as these expressed the scribes’ implicit hope that they too would be remembered by future generations.

Death was an ever-looming reality in the dynastic period; the average lifespan was less than 40 years. However short their individual lives, people trusted that their words and deeds, monuments and ideas would endure. The stories and images originally recorded in Iti-ibi-iqer’s tomb inspired people to add their own, encouraging others to do the same as a means of both celebrating and perpetuating a millennial living history.

The last New Kingdom dipinti in Iti-ibi-iqer’s tomb was made during the reign of Ramses XI (c.1100BC). While people may have subsequently visited, no one wrote there for 1800 years. Sometime after the Arab Conquest (642AD) the tomb became known as the mausoleum of a revered sheikh, attracting pilgrims who left commemorative texts in red, black and yellow ink on its walls, echoing the practice of the ancients.

REFERENCES

In addition to Jochem Kahl’s Ancient Asyut, the First Synthesis After 300 Years of Research, (The Asyut Project 1. Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2017) and Siut-Theben : Zur Wertschätzung von Traditionen im alten Ägypten (Probleme der Ägyptologie 13. Brill, Leiden, 1999), this section draws from papers delivered at the British Museum’s Annual Egyptological Colloquium, Asyut Through Time, Conflict and Culture in Middle Egypt, 20-21 July, 2017, including Jochem Kahl (Free University of Berlin), “Asyut, the capital that never was”; Bahar Landsberger (University of Heidelberg), “Surroundings of ‘Siut’ as told by papyri”, and Ursula Verhoeven (Mainz University), “Activities in the Gebel Asyut al-Gharbi during the New Kingdom.”
Pottery fragments known as sherds are the debris of antiquity, usually broken cooking and storage vessels cast aside by their users that pile up over time. Nothing could be more ordinary and functional; made of clay they were frequently left undecorated. Yet by grouping and analyzing these bits of old crockery, archaeologists are able to extract a range of information about ancient societies.

Once the sherds are selected, washed, measured and whenever possible, reconstructed like a jigsaw puzzle, different forms of vessel are identified and correlated with the findspot. We know that sherds in tombs belonged to jars or amphorae that stored the foods believed to nourish the ka (soul) of the deceased in the afterlife. When found in a house or town, they probably served in a kitchen or a bakery and add to knowledge of how living and working spaces were organized. Remaining traces of the original contents of pottery vessels may be analyzed, revealing what was cooked or stored inside, shedding light on ancient foodstuffs, cooking and eating habits.

Over time, archaeologists’ close attention to sherds has resulted in a pool of data regarding the shapes and uses of different vessel types in different places and periods. Consequently, sherds facilitate the dating of sites where inscriptions or artefacts are unavailable, which is typically the case in the burials and settlements of the poor. Methods of manufacture and technical improvements are also observable, including the introduction of faster spinning potters- wheels that produced more symmetrical, if thinner, pottery.

Sherds have been useful in tracking Egypt’s trade connections with Syria, Lebanon, elsewhere in the Mediterranean and points further east, since different peoples favoured different shapes of clay containers. Analysis of the clay itself pinpoints the vessel’s origin, reflecting variations in soil components between locations. Some forms of vessels typically used in other countries were discovered to have been fashioned from Nile clay. Since they would have contained fine oils or wines from other lands, delicacies that only the elite could afford, these fake foreign vessels were a kind of status symbol, the ancient equivalent of a designer knockoff. Sherds may lack the allure of rare and finely crafted artefacts but it is precisely their ubiquity that renders them valuable. An integral feature of everyday life, pottery vessels were produced and consumed in large quantities, in Egypt as elsewhere. Present at most settlement sites, sherds offer archaeologists a frame of reference and point of departure for furthering our understanding of human history.
REFERENCE

Based on information provided by Andrea Kilian (Mainz University) who also presented, “Asyut’s First Intermediate Period Pottery: new insights into ancient material” at the British Museum’s Annual Egyptological Colloquium, Asyut Through Time: Conflict and Culture in Middle Egypt, July 20-21, 2017.
An ancient criminal case, circa 522 BC

In antiquity, as now, some people were willing to go to great lengths to secure their wealth and take revenge on those they thought had benefited at their expense. Such was the case in Asyut, as revealed by a papyrus document found in a tomb at the foot of the Western Mountain necropolis in 1922. The papyrus (now in the Cairo Egyptian Museum, CG 50059) was part of the private archive of a priest named Nespamedushepes and its text concerned the results of a court battle where he was declared rightful owner of very expensive pieces of property. From another document in the archive, we learn that the items in question had an estimated value corresponding to about ten kilograms of silver or 200 cows. Nespamedushepes's claim had been unsuccessfully challenged by some distant relatives, who apparently decided not to take their loss sitting down.

The information contained in the document was illuminating but it is what papyrologists found missing that told the bigger story. Recent scrutiny of the papyrus revealed that several important passages recording the settled ownership of the disputed property were erased not long after its issue, including the names of 'Party A' and the losing relatives, whose signatures indicated their acceptance of the verdict. As the winner of the case, Nespamedushepes had no cause to alter his proof of ownership. His relatives, however, were highly motivated.

The one who tampered with the document would have had to act by stealth, since the papyrus would have been kept in Nespamedushepes's archive. That he acted in haste is apparent in the barely perceptible remnant of his name – Qeraenhor that in one instance he did not have time to thoroughly erase.

Qeraenhor was apparently an educated man who could read demotic, the popular form of writing used from around 660 BC for such administrative documents, and he was familiar with demotic contracts and their constituting elements. In short, Qeraenhor knew which parts of the document to suppress in order to render it invalid.

A patient man, Qeraenhor would have had to wait until Nespamedushepes's death before he would once more attempt to regain the property before the court; only then would his rival's children discover that their claim to the property had lost its legal merit.

The outcome of Qeraenhor's treachery is unknown but this archive offers proof that people have always been willing to defy the law if it displeased them. It also demonstrates how the most significant information an ancient document contains may sometimes lie between the lines.
REFERENCE

Shashotep: Asyut’s Closest Neighbour
Proximity to Asyut was a mixed blessing for the ancient city of Shashotep. Located on the Nile’s west bank just five kilometers southeast of its affluent neighbour, it was the capital of the 11th nome of Upper Egypt (fig. 27). The smallest of Egypt’s 42 provinces, the 11th Upper Egyptian nome was half the size of the 13th (of which Asyut was the capital) extending less than 23 kilometers from Deir Durunka in the north to Abutig in the south. The mountains of Durunka, running along the desert’s edge bordered the province on the west, with the Nile to the east.

The land was as productive as that of Asyut province and when it came time to wage battle on behalf of Egypt’s northern or southern rulers, Shashotep’s men fought alongside Asyut’s. Shashotep is first attested in the 10th Dynasty Western Mountain tomb of Asyuti governor Khety II (c.2040BC), where it is named as the starting point of the fleet launched to defend the borders of the Herakleopolitain kingdom from Theban opposition in the south.

Over time, Shashotep and Asyut shared both the pain of defeat and the prestige of victory, and like neighbouring cities in any era, they interacted socially and economically. Yet the larger, older city yielded greater power. While the 11th Upper Egyptian nome had its own governors at some points in its history, notably during the 12th Dynasty (Middle Kingdom), it was more often overseen by Asyuti nomarchs. Evidence may still surface, but for now it seems as if the nome was not self-governed again until around the first century AD.
In terms of regional importance, Shashotep was eclipsed by Asyut in antiquity and in modern times it has received less scholarly attention. This is partly because Asyut’s necropolis was larger and better preserved than Shashotep’s and more attractive to archaeologists. But English Egyptologist Flinders Petrie uncovered significant artefacts during excavations (1906-1907) in and around Deir Rifeh, Shashotep’s necropolis in the Durunka Mountains (fig. 28). Currently housed in European collections including the British Museum, many of these items await publication but there are masterpieces among them (fig. 29). The quality of craftsmanship of these funerary furnishings suggests that however modest a capital, Shashotep produced expert artisans.

Shashotep’s status as a provincial capital is affirmed by inscriptions in the tombs of Deif Rifeh built by local nomarchs and the city’s elite during the Middle Kingdom. In addition to tombs from the Old Kingdom, the First and Second Intermediate Periods and the New Kingdom, the monumental rock-cut structures dating to the Twelfth Dynasty suggest that self-governance brought prosperity, at least to a class of elites.
There is textual evidence that Shashotep gained prominence as a trade center during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods (342-642 AD) when it was known as Hypsele, “the height.” Like other cities, it had its ups and downs, but while the reasons for Shashotep’s shifting fortunes remain to be determined, they were probably linked to its symbiotic relationship with both the Nile and Asyut. Thanks to an unusual advantage it holds over Asyut, Shashotep’s history is finally coming to light. While ancient Asyut lies beneath a maze of modern streets and urban sprawl, Shutb, the modern name for Shashotep, sits atop a mound of archaeological remains that has accumulated since its founding and is accessible to study (fig. 30). A growing agricultural town, Shutb is the latest installment in a 4000 year-long history, offering a wealth of archaeological data regarding the various periods of its settlement.

**Born of the Nile**

Shutb’s environment shows signs of having evolved from a Nile sandbar to an island, consolidated by vegetation over time. When the river encounters a sandbar it splits to either side causing the current to quicken, picking up sediment along the way. When it passes the obstruction the current slows again, re-depositing the sediment and extending the sand bar on both sides. Seeds delivered by birds or present in the sediment take root, eventually forming a solid matrix of plant life.

While the banks of the former sandbar acquire bulk, the central area remains somewhat lower and preserves a pool ideal for fishing. In this fertile environment, a settlement grew to become the ancient city of Shashotep.
During the Old Kingdom, the kôm (as occupation mounds are locally called) already sat above the floodplain.

A channel of the Nile flowed on the west side of Shashotep during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, when people were busy with the production of glass, brick and perhaps metal along its shores. Nineteenth century maps drawn by members of Napoleon’s expedition show the channel flowing north between Shutb and the Durunka Mountains, passing west of Asyut (fig. 3). Although it no longer exists, this channel was present in antiquity and there were many other migrating channels in the area at different times.

Like Asyut, Shashotep was close to the main branch of the Nile at the end of the First Intermediate Period, according to tomb inscriptions in Asyut’s necropolis. By the Middle Kingdom, Kôm Shutb rose above the high-level flood mark. Over time the Nile migrated east, away from the city, leaving it slightly elevated amidst the surrounding fields. The west side of the kôm where farm animals are now raised was once a waterfront with ships sailing north and south.

In addition to water for farming, building and industry, the Nile provided the most efficient means of transporting trading goods and supplies. It was also a pleasant way of conducting official errands for those who had the opportunity to do so. A tomb inscription from the 12th Dynasty reign of Amenemhat III (1854 to 1808bc) reports how an Asyuti ‘deputy’ named Khety sailed from Asyut to Shashotep and back again, carrying a piece of equipment for the Temple of Wepwawet (fig. 31).
Center of worship

Shashotep’s principle deity was the ram-headed Khnum, associated with the source of the Nile and credited with the creation of human beings that he shaped from clay with a potter’s wheel. Names like Khnum-Nakht, Nefer-Khnum and Khumn-Hotep appearing in tombs in Deir Rifeh show a special reverence for this god, and the titles of these individuals designate them as priests or servants in a local temple dedicated to “the lord of Shashotep”.

A New Kingdom papyrus lists donations and seventeen attendant priests in Khnum’s temple. During that period the temple held a shrine to Osiris, who was also honored in Asyut. The temple was active in the Ptolemaic period, according to papyri found in Deir Rifeh. That Khnum was still popular in Roman times is evidenced by coins struck in Shashotep bearing the figure of a ram. While archaeological remains of Khnum’s temple have yet to be uncovered, it was probably built at the center of the ancient town, and now lies beneath the highest portion of Kôm Shubt.

Despite Khnum’s status as Shashotep’s favoured god, the 11th Upper Egyptian nome has often been referred to as the ‘Seth nome’ because its name was classified by the Seth-animal, a four-legged creature with a canine body, upstanding square-shaped ears and a tufted tail. Also depicted as a man with the head of an unidentifiable, perhaps mythical or extinct animal, Seth was associated with sudden storms, with strangers and strange lands, lizards and scorpions.

A contentious deity who murdered his brother Osiris, Seth also tried to kill Osiris’s son Horus, so that he alone might rule Egypt. But Horus triumphed and according to a Ptolemaic-era rendition of the myth, Seth took refuge in Shashotep. No evidence of a Seth cult has been found in Shashotep. There is, however, a Seth temple at Matmar on the Nile’s east bank across from Shubt and it has been suggested that the nome might at some point have encompassed this additional territory.

Layers of life

Kôms in the Asyut-Shutb area that appear in maps from the Description de l’Égypte are still visible in Google Earth satellite images. Asyut’s is the highest, at thirteen meters above the surrounding floodplain and Shutb’s, at eleven meters, is a close second. The stories of a people and a city that have endured throughout millennia lie within these dense mounds of debris.

As soon as archaeologists began cleaning step-like trenches on the steep western slope of Kôm Shubt, they uncovered mud-brick walls whose exceptional thickness suggests they belonged to either a palace or an administrative building, such as might be found in a regional capital (fig. 32). Soil samples taken near
the kôm revealed an abundance of sherds from the Middle Kingdom and several dating to Old Kingdom. Excavations are in their early stages and have barely scratched the surface, but they have already uncovered remains including pottery, bits of glass, bone, fabric and metal, from a range of historic periods.

Portions of jar containers with modelled necks and large bowls made in Qena clay in the Third Intermediate Period (1070-712BC) emerged from the trenches; eight vases for transporting foods and liquids were found perfectly intact as were homemade clay statuettes in the shape of a four-legged animal with a tail (fig. 33). Most of the pottery was produced locally in alluvial clay, including a set of conical goblets where water, wine or beer would have been served to guests at ancient gatherings.

There were sherds from the Ptolemaic and Roman era and the Byzantine period (4th-7th century AD) was amply represented by fragments of wine amphorae, cookware and tableware, some of them beautifully decorated, in addition to pieces of glass and portions of lamps where oil was burned with the help of a twisted cloth wick. Plentiful sherds from the period encompassing the 13th-20th century (i.e. the modern era) included some from the Mamluk and Ottoman period that were glazed in bright colours.
Among the finds were pottery and stone items that were used for domestic activities, some of which are still practiced in the present day. Pigeon pots, in antiquity as now, were stacked and attached with mud plaster to create coves for the birds that were raised as a source of food. Like their ancestors, today’s farmers rely on their wheat harvest for bread throughout the year, but they use a grain-grinding machine that is shared or rented by community members to produce flour rather than grinding stones, such as the (portions of) one found at the site. Bread is still baked in traditional dome-shaped mud-brick ovens and food is often prepared in clay ovenware, much as it was in antiquity.

Weaving is no longer common in Egypt, but the people of ancient Shashotep made their own fabric (probably linen), using spinning weights of unbaked clay to balance their looms (fig. 34). Clay ‘scooping pots’ found in Kôm Shutb were once attached to the shaduf, a counterbalance mechanism for lifted water from the river or canals that was invented in the Old Kingdom and is still in use in some parts of Egypt.

Art for the after life

Like Asyut’s necropolis, Deir Rifeh was located in the cliffs overlooking the verdant plain and both cemeteries were used as quarries in antiquity resulting in extensive damage. In Deir Rifeh, the tombs of the nomarchs and the local elite were built around mid-way up the cliffs, with the smaller shaft tombs of their families and entourages directly in front of them. While some date to the New Kingdom, most of the monumental rock-cut tombs were built earlier, at the end of First Intermediate Period and in the Middle Kingdom.

By 1907, when Flinders Petrie excavated at Deir Rifeh, the necropolis had been heavily plundered and the shaft tombs stripped bare, yet some remarkable items emerged. Several finely crafted human-shaped wooden coffins painted in the image of the deceased and decorated with unusual bead or floral patterns date to the Middle Kingdom, when so-called anthropoid coffins were rarely
used. A ‘birth tusk’ made of hippopotamus tooth, usually inscribed with spells for the protection of elite women and children, was the sole object found in a late-Middle Kingdom tomb; another tomb from the same period held a golden pendant that tomb raiders had somehow overlooked.

The most famous discovery in Deir Rifeh was the Tomb of the Two Brothers; one of the largest burials in Deir Rifeh, it was found undisturbed. Dating to the 12th Dynasty (1994-1781 BC), and packed with finely crafted furniture and statuary, inscriptions indicate that the tomb belonged to both Khnum-Nakht, a priest in the temple of Khnum, and Nakht-Ankh, referred to as “the worthy one.” Khnum-Nakht’s father and grandfather were described as local governors, but while he and Nakht-Ankh shared the same mother, Nakht-Ankh’s paternal ancestry was unclear.

Their faces, as represented on their elaborately decorated coffins bear no family resemblance (fig. 35). The elder brother Nakht-Ankh was dark of complexion with rounded features suggesting Nubian ancestry, while Khnum-Nakht was light-skinned, with a longer, more angular face. Recent DNA studies conducted by the University of Manchester revealed that they were in fact half-brothers but the identity of Nakht-Ankh’s father remains a mystery.

Fig. 35: Human-shaped coffin from the Tomb of Two Brothers, Manchester Museum, University of Manchester.
The brothers nonetheless shared the same privileged status, as indicated by the quality and quantity of funerary goods found inside. Among these were two wonderfully detailed wooden models of ships, one for sailing up the Nile (south) with the crew hoisting the sail, the other with the sails lowered and the oars out for rowing north, downriver (fig. 36).

On the first ship, four boatmen raise the sail, four sit on deck, a look-out stands at the prow and a steersman at the stern, with the master seated in front of the cabin. Bits of string were used as rigging and the rudder was painted decoratively with the protective eye of Horus and a lotus motif. On the second ship, the sails were lashed to the lowered mast and ten rowers manned the oars, while the steersman and look-out wore white garments presumably to protect them from the chilly north winds.

Average people left this world with fewer accessories to accompany them. Their burial ground was located in the plain below the cliffs of Deir Rifæh, consisting largely of simple pit graves that may have belonged to residents of Shashotep or the village of Rifæh, located nearer the necropolis. Some graves, containing baskets, leather work and pottery, reflect the burial customs of the Nubian people, many of whom migrated to Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period (1700-1550 BC).

Other pit graves were marked by ‘soul houses,’ crude clay models depicting the funerary chapels or other settings associated with wealthy burials, the places
where offerings were made and rituals performed to ensure the deceased’s position in the afterlife (fig. 37). Soul houses functioned as tombstones, providing a focus for the bereaved to visit and honor their dead. But for people who could not afford a grand burial and costly rituals, ‘soul houses’ also expressed the wish on behalf of their owners that they might achieve as comfortable a place in the afterlife as their wealthier neighbours.

Fig. 37: Soul house, Manchester Museum, University of Manchester. (4357)

REFERENCES

A deeper look

Fig. 38: The augering team, 2017, Matjaz Kacicnik.
In the fields surrounding Shutb, a group of people sitting on the ground appears to be performing a mysterious ritual aimed at extracting portions of the earth. The British Museum team is in fact at work using a hand drill, or auger, a low-tech instrument capable of delivering a wide range of scientific data that improves our understanding of archaeological settings.

Rotating the handle causes the drill to penetrate the ground while capturing 10cm-wide and 20cm-deep cylinders of soil, each carefully stored in numbered containers. These core samples hold bits of pottery and stone, metal ore, river sediment and other elements. Analyzing their contents helps the team identify the periods of Shutb’s settlement and map its borders at different points in history, shedding light on the relationship between the town and the surrounding landscape, particularly the Nile.

Samples obtained from around Kôm Shutb suggest that it was once a Nile island. ‘Baffled sediments’ produced in the early stages of island evolution (when plant life mixes sediment and water) contain high levels of the mineral mica. When found with rhizocretions, a substance that forms around plant roots, mica is a useful indicator that the area was once adjacent to the water. Both mica and rhizocretions are common around Kôm Shutb and their presence in samples from systematically plotted locations allowed the flanks’ original perimeter to be mapped. Augering results also suggested that the ancient city gradually expanded in a northeasterly direction.

The magnetometer, another instrument that allows archaeologists to see beneath the surface, has been used to map everything from prehistoric campsites to urban settlements. Magnetometers contain sensors that react to alterations in the Earth’s magnetic field caused by metals, brick, burned soil, types of rock and even decayed organic materials. The magnometer survey conducted around Kôm Shutb confirmed that a river channel passed southwest side of the ancient city. It also registered the presence of buildings just east of that channel, perhaps indicating the city’s edge.

Gently probing the Earth, augering and magnometer surveys are archaeologists’ underground eyes, pointing them in the most fruitful directions for further study.

REFERENCE
From Here to Eternity
The ancient Egyptians envisaged death as a journey to another world much like this one, a mirror-image of the Nile Valley minus sickness, calamity and work. To ensure an eternity of ease and plenty, people figured they would need the same things that had served them in life, starting with a body. Mummification was meant to preserve the physical remains of the deceased (fig. 39), who was buried with manuals written on tomb walls, coffins or papyri containing instructions to guide, protect and empower his or her spirit in the afterlife.

People buried household items like pottery vessels containing food and drinks, but also oils used in funerary rituals (fig. 40). In addition to offerings of real food (fig. 41), the offering lists inscribed or painted on tomb walls, and models of food-production activities were believed to guarantee an endless supply of provisions for the afterlife.

People took personal items to the tomb - cosmetics, clothes and jewelry - as if looking forward to a long and leisurely retirement (fig. 42). The ancients knew that life itself was short; in the Pharaonic era people lived an average of 36 years (although infant mortality rates influence this figure). “Little is life on Earth,” reads an inscription in a Middle Kingdom tomb of a palace official, the vizier Amen-User, “eternity is in the Necropolis.”

Preparation for death was in fact a driving force behind ancient Egyptian culture, one that played a significant role in the economy, engaging labourers, craftsmen and artists. Funerary beliefs and rituals generated vast amounts of objects, buildings, painting, sculpture and texts, all of which shed light on the living, on people’s activities, their hopes and fears.
The fluid interplay between the worlds of the living and dead was reflected in the practice of writing ‘letters to the dead’ that were delivered to the tomb. In them, people told the deceased about their day-to-day problems, sometimes blaming them for their troubles and other times requesting their help in exchange for offerings made in the deceased’s name. Likewise, votive objects related to acts of personal piety reveal the close rapport Egyptians maintained with their gods. Then as now, life’s triumphs and hardships compelled individuals to appeal to the divine, whether in gratitude or the wish for assistance.

Above
Fig. 41: Small shallow dish hand-modeled in Nile clay with ancient, desiccated figs, Western Mountain, Trustees of the British Museum. (EA45292, EA5368)

Right
Fig. 42: Objects from the burial of the lady Nebetemkhis, Western Mountain, Museo Egizio Turin. (S.14378b, d-h)

Opposite page, top
Fig. 39: Mummy of Ankhef excavated by Hogarth, Western Mountain, 1907, Trustees of the British Museum. (EA46631)

Opposite page, bottom
Fig. 40: Red-ware pottery footed bowl, from Asyut’s Western Mountain necropolis, Trustees of the British Museum. (EA45245)
A land apart

The people of Asyut and Shashotep were buried in the mountain range to the west of their cities, where necropoleis extend over several kilometres at the edge of the cultivated plain. Tombs belonging to Asyut's ancient elite overlooked the city in the necropolis of the Western Mountain (Gebel el-Gharbi), also called 'the other land.' Governors of Shashotep were buried in the cliffs further south, just west of the village of Deir Rifheh (fig. 28). In both cases, the wealthier tombs came with a view, while average people were buried closer to the plain.

During the First Intermediate Period and 12th Dynasty, Asyut's Western Mountain was used only for burials, funerary rituals and visits to the dead. Stone for building the city was quarried to the south of the necropolis. Beginning in the 18th Dynasty, 700 years later, some of the ancient tombs were themselves mined for stone, and new quarries were opened in the mountain. In the New Kingdom it was not uncommon for older tombs to be reused, yet new ones were also added throughout the Late Period and into the Ptolemaic era (305-30BC).

At various periods, the necropoleis of Asyut and Shashotep like others in Egypt, suffered the damage of foreign invaders who pillaged tombs and temples at their whim. Meanwhile, tombs were slowly but systematically plundered by the needy (or greedy) of local communities, leaving very few burials intact.

Centuries later, when the ancient religion was just a memory and the language of tomb and temple inscriptions all but forgotten, the Coptic communities of Asyut and Shashotep adapted the burial grounds to their needs (fig. 22). In addition to burying their dead there, they built monasteries and transformed some tombs into chapels. Hermits likewise used tombs as isolated refuges to pursue their spiritual path. The Church of the Virgin Mary and the Church of Saint Theodore in Deir Rifheh were mentioned by 12th century travelers and still function today. After the Arab Conquest, Muslims also used portions of the Western Mountain as cemeteries.

In 1869, Thomas Cook's steamship cruises along the Nile began bringing travelers who stopped briefly in Asyut to visit the rock-cut tombs en route to Luxor and Aswan. Some of these early tourists had no qualms about chipping away chunks of painted bas-relief to take home as souvenirs. Many left graffiti, their names and the dates of their visit, sometimes carved in tomb walls with a knife.

Over the course of more than four millennia, the necropoleis were likewise altered by the forces of nature: flash floods, earthquakes, erosion; bats and pigeons roosted in tombs, further damaging their interiors. Yet despite all that was lost, the structures that remain and the artefacts retrieved from them reveal how the people of the Asyut region conducted their business and personal affairs, how they worshipped their gods, living and dying in the unshakeable belief in eternity.
Undying art

Burial customs that emanated from the palace were eventually replicated more modestly by the regional elite. Yet in provincial capitals far from the royal court, innovations and elaborations were regularly introduced. This was the case in Asyut, where funerary culture developed distinctive features and fostered region-wide trends in burial goods.

The arts of carpentry and wood-carving were highly developed in Asyut. The miniature wooden models made there enjoyed popularity throughout several centuries of the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom, as did decorated wooden coffins. The coffin’s exterior was painted with talismanic eyes (wedjat) on a bright yellow square flanked with columns of hieroglyphs (fig. 6).

The coffin’s interior was painted with magic spells to protect the deceased (‘coffin texts’) or with images of items used in funerary rituals, like mirrors, pieces of cloth and vessels containing the ‘seven holy oils’, some labeled with instructions on how to employ the object in the ritual or en route to the afterlife. Other images drawn on the coffin, like headrests, sandals and walking sticks, ensured the deceased’s comfort on his or her journey.

Local scribes took creative liberties when copying the standard texts. Local craftsmen likewise bent the rules regarding the placement of texts on coffins, switching those meant to appear on the east (right) side with those designated for the west (left) or multiplying the number of texts columns. Magic spells were adapted and rearranged into new compositions and some formulations are unique to Asyut.

In 1908 the Italian archaeological mission found both wooden models and painted...
coffins in the Western Mountain tomb of Shemes and his wife Rehwerawsen, who probably lived during the 12th Dynasty reign of Senwosret I (c.1965 to 1920 BC). Untouched by theft or vandalism, the tomb’s contents included an array of locally-produced burial goods: three boat models with crews, two wooden statuettes of the tomb owner (one 35cm and one 120cm high), a long wooden stick indicating Shemes’ stature in society, six pottery vessel stands and over 120 cups and jars, representing provisions to sustain the deceased in the afterlife (figs. 43-44).

The Tomb of Chancellor Nakhti, one of twenty-six tombs that French archaeologists found remarkably intact in the Western Mountain in 1903, likewise offers insight into regional burial traditions. Nakhti, who lived at the end of the First Intermediate Period held the title ‘overseer of seals.’ His mummy, found in a wooden coffin nested inside another coffin, lay on its left side, its head on a wooden headrest.

Nakhti’s body was sheathed in a mummy mask of cartonage (layers of linen or papyrus glued together with plaster) decorated with a painted collar and bracelets around the wrists and ankles. Eight wooden statues representing Nakhti surrounded his coffin, one of them made of imported ebony, and a ninth fashioned from alabaster. The tomb was full of models – of a lady offering-bearer in a beautifully painted dress, a brewery, boats, an abattoir, the measuring of grain, and an offering table.

The tomb also contained miniature models of objects Nakhti must have prized while alive: two each of shields, bows, quivers and arrows, in addition to hand adzes and chisels with bronze blades. Inside the coffin, Nakhti kept a number of objects close at hand, including a mirror, a bronze basin, a razor, and model slippers, presumably that he might awaken in the afterlife, put on his slippers and shave as he was accustomed to doing each morning.
Afterlife accessories

The way people were buried and the goods that accompanied them speak of their religious beliefs while offering signs of social conditions influencing their lives. The well-equipped tombs of Shemes and Nakhti, for example, reflect both personal status and the relatively peaceful and prosperous Middle Kingdom era in which these individuals lived. Earlier (First Intermediate Period) tombs contained models of bows, arrows and shield handles, reflecting the prevailing political unrest and strong military presence in Asyut (fig. 45).

Before 2000BC (First Intermediate Period) when Asyut engaged in the wars waged between the north and south, the elite had large and costly tombs, in contrast to the burial arrangements of the less privileged. These consisted of small wooden boxes where the bodies lie in a cramped position on its left side, with only a headrest and a few pottery vessels to accompany it, though the bodies of young women were sometimes clothed in dresses of finely pleated white linen (fig. 46).

In other burials from the same period, bodies wrapped in linen bandages and covered in linen shrouds were placed in larger, rectangular wooden coffins decorated with the wedjat eye and a hieroglyphic offering formula that preserved the name of the deceased. Some contained stone vessels, wooden boxes for ladies’ cosmetics and combs or ivory spatulas (for applying make-up or unguents). However minimally equipped, the quality of these items indicates that these were still the burials of relatively well-off individuals. Poorer people were buried in baskets of rushes and reeds, or simple reed mats.

Unlike Asyut, the necropolis of Shashotep, Deir Rifeh, did not yield a wealth of intact tombs. But its unbroken sequence of burials covering the arc of more than a millennium (First Intermediate to the Ramesside Period, 1292-1077BC) offers indications of how burial customs were shaped by the times and developed independently from larger religious centres such as Thebes.
Aside from the Tomb of the Two Brothers and a number of rock-cut tombs, the bulk of the Middle Kingdom burials found at Deir Rifeh were little more than pits containing pottery vessels. Some held items of adornment - beads, or cosmetic vessels, objects the deceased had used while alive. But pottery soul houses (fig. 37), mummy masks, wooden models and coffins (sometimes human-shaped, i.e. anthropoid), were especially made for the tomb.

In tombs from the Second Intermediate Period (1700-1550 BC), only pottery and some personal items were found, perhaps owing to greater poverty and/or the absence of workshops specialized in burial goods during this century of instability. Deir Rifeh comprised many ‘pan-graves’, named for their shallow pan-like shape, from this period, often containing a type of pottery associated with the Nubian communities that settled in the region at that time.

During the 18th Dynasty (early New Kingdom, c.1550 to 1290 BC) shaft tombs with a small burial chamber at the bottom were common at Deir Rifeh. These contained pottery vessels to ensure a lasting food supply and often beads from necklaces or bracelets that had belonged to the deceased. One tomb held a fragment of papyrus inscribed with a popular literary work (“The Teaching of Kaires”) and others contained mummy masks.

Very few items made expressly for the tomb are attested at Rifeh from this period, only objects used in daily life; no decorated coffins or Books of the Dead, none of the burial goods typical of the 18th Dynasty. The use of shaft tombs suggests a wish for greater security and that tomb theft was a concern, so it may be that some burial goods had been stolen.

The nature of tomb contents changed again during the later New Kingdom, the Ramesside Period (1292-1077 BC), when objects made especially for the burial largely outnumbered those taken from daily life and when pottery vessels, a standard feature of tomb equipment guaranteeing supplies of food and drink, were entirely absent.

Beliefs may have shifted; texts from this period suggest that the deceased might become a god-like being, who would presumably have no need for sustenance in the afterlife. The most common purpose-made burial good from the Ramesside period found in Deir Rifeh were shabtis, small figurines representing servants who would perform whatever tasks were required to fill the deceased’s varied needs in the afterlife (fig. 47).
Lasting prayers

The ancients’ nurtured relationships with their gods in various ways, beginning with the naming of children for the deity parents hoped would protect them, just as Christian children are named for saints or Muslims for the Prophet or other admired religious figures. In Shashotep, for example, names often incorporated that of the locally favoured god, Khnum, for example Khnum-Hotep (‘Khnum is satisfied’). Average citizens celebrated the cult of the gods during festivals when statues of the deities left their homes and were paraded through the streets. But year round, on their own time, people had other ways of expressing their devotion. Depending on their means, they might offer prayers inscribed on a rough fragment of pottery or stone (ostraca) or on large, free-standing clay or stone stelae.

British archaeologist Gerard Avery Wainwright found hundreds of votive stelae in 1922 while excavating the Western Mountain tomb of Djefaihapi III, a 12th Dynasty Asyut nomarch. Fabricated throughout the New Kingdom, the stelae (357 stone, 136 clay) may have been moved to the tomb from their original location in a nearby temple or perhaps the tomb itself had become a sanctuary or repository for these prayers etched in stone and clay.

Mostly dedicated to Wepwawet, (though some evoked Osiris and Hathor of Medjed), the stone stelae were typically carved in bas-relief then painted in colours (fig. 48). A figure representing the person making the offering is shown standing to the right of the god while inscriptions record the names of the donor and the deity, sometimes accompanied by the latter’s titles and brief hymns or invocations.

The more affordable clay stelae dedicated by poorer citizens had no inscriptions and often the image of the donor was absent. Crudely
molded clay figures of canids were attached to the surface of the tablet before it was dried and/or fired or else it was left smooth and simply painted in several colors. Although less elaborate than the stone steleae carved with the names of wealthier priests and officials, the message of gratitude and the request for Wepwawets’ favour was still implicit in the offering.

Perhaps the most striking expression of personal piety was the dedication of animal mummies that were probably prepared and purchased near a temple before being laid to rest in a special section of the necropolis (fig. 49). The practice developed throughout Egypt in the Late Period (712-332bc) and its popularity may reflect the heightened sense of vulnerability associated with a time when Egypt was ruled by foreigners. An early Ptolemaic papyrus referred to a ‘house of Anubis’ and ‘burials of Anubis’ at Asyut. The two animal cemeteries found in the Western Mountain probably functioned through the Roman Period (ending 2nd-3rd century AD).

Mummies of dogs associated with Wepwawet and Anubis, Asyut’s favoured gods, were the most abundant votive offering. Dogs are often depicted in tombs in Egypt seated beside the deceased, suggesting they were kept as pets. They were also painted on coffins, affirming the status of the city’s protective deities.

Animals related to other gods were also mummified in Asyut: ibises, falcons, baboons, bulls and cats. The animals themselves were not worshipped, but one interpretation is that by presenting the mummified remains of an Ibis to the Ibis-headed Thoth, or a dog or wolf to Wepwawet, people hoped to please their gods with a gift in their image that was designed to last for eternity. According to the American traveler Charles Edwin Wilbour (1833-96) who visited Asyut in 1889, there was a cemetery filled with canid mummies stacked over two meters high, some painted with faces and protruding tongues.

One of the animal cemeteries currently lies within a military compound and is therefore inaccessible. The other, high in the Western Mountain, was concealed by a mudslide following violent rainfall in the early 1990s and recently excavated by the German-Egyptian Asyut Project. Like other animal burials in Egypt, the Tomb of the Dogs takes the form of a gallery, a long corridor flanked by smaller corridors and rooms. These had been heavily pillaged, not least because the tomb was described in a popular 15th century manual (The Book of the Treasured Pearls and Hidden Secret on Indications, Cachets, Burials and Treasures) that guided amateur treasure-hunters to archaeological sites around Egypt.

Fig. 49: Animal mummies, Egypt, Trustees of the British Museum.
(BM EA37348, EA26847, EA6752, EA55614, EA6753)
The Tomb of the Dogs contained the remains of birds, fish, a reptile and canids, mostly dog *Canis familiaris*, a species descended from the wolf and domesticated since prehistoric times, in addition to the Egyptian grey wolf *Canis aureus lupaster* and fox *Vulpes sp*. Around 45 percent of the canid bones sampled from one room in the tomb were from neonatal dogs or puppies, suggesting that smaller animals were deemed preferable for votives, though larger ones were also used (fig. 50). To meet the demand for these votive offerings, animals were probably bred somewhere in the temple precincts and expressly killed, though some may have died natural deaths.

Along with stelae, clay figurines and animal mummies may have served as the physical manifestations of a prayer, not unlike the lighting of candles in churches, or the burning of incense at shrines. But rather than an ephemeral flame or fragrance, these votive offerings were meant to convey a solid commitment to the gods that would endure throughout life, and ever after.

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A model life

Everything people put in their tombs had a symbolic or magical significance aimed at helping the deceased reach the afterlife and flourish there. Tombs were often decorated with scenes from daily life so that these familiar pursuits might continue after death. Different sorts of burial goods were popular at different times and in different regions, representing traditions that lasted hundreds and sometimes thousands of years. Among these traditional tomb accessories were wooden models depicting activities that would render the afterlife comfortable and furnish the deceased’s varied needs.

Beginning in the First Intermediate Period, Asyuti workshops produced fine wooden burial goods such as models, statues and coffins. The popularity of these items generated high demand, placing Asyut at the center of the region’s woodcarving and carpentry industry. The quality and diversity of local workmanship is on display in artefacts from the tombs of the region’s elite dating between c.2030 and 1958 BC.

The miniature wooden models produced in Asyut typically depicted three themes, all representing activities or services that were especially valued by the living. The most popular was a series of graceful, bare-breasted offering-bearers carrying baskets of foodstuffs on their heads, their white tunics sometimes decorated with a feather or fish-net shaped motif. Models of boats complete with crews (such as those found in Deir Rifeh’s Tomb of the Two Brothers; fig. 36) to enable movement and transport, were just as popular.

Breweries, believed to ensure an abundance of the nourishing and mildly stimulating beer that Egyptians consumed in large quantities, were likewise a principle subject of detailed models. Other themes included bakeries and flour preparation, where grain was ground with a stone roller. Models of farm-life scenes like plowing and husbandry have been associated with Asyut but probably originated in another atelier, in Meir, 60 miles north of Asyut.

Wood was – and remains – a precious material in Egypt, a desert country where trees are relatively scarce. The Asyuti artisans used timber from local

Fig. 51: Painted wooden model of men tending a fire and kneading dough or grinding grain, Western Mountain, British Museum. (BM EA45197)
trees including the sycamore fig (ficus sycomorus) that was cultivated in Egypt from antiquity for its fruit and wood and sometimes appeared in tomb decoration as the ‘tree of life.’ The other common wood was from the tamarisk (also called ‘salt cedar’, for its ability to thrive in salty soils) that is still found in Middle and Upper Egypt but now rarely used for carpentry. Some items, notably the models of archers and infantrymen in the Asyuti governor Mesehti’s tomb, were fashioned from cedar imported from Lebanon, an expensive and therefore prestigious material.

Models were produced all over Egypt, but the Asyuti ones are easily distinguished from the others by their style, theme and means of manufacture. Careful examination of their decorative aspects, like the baskets on the offering bearers’ heads and the protective eye (wedjat) painted on some boat hulls, enabled researchers to identify the hand of an unnamed Asyuti craftsman. His work and that of his colleagues, now on display in museums worldwide, illustrates the essential aspects of what the ancients considered an ideal life, where death was but a brief interruption.

REFERENCE

Coptic Christians believe that Saint Mark the Evangelist brought the teachings of Jesus Christ to Egypt in the first century AD, founding the first Christian community in Egypt. With the legalisation of Christianity by Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century AD, many more Egyptians adopted the new religion, which promised eternal reward for the meek and oppressed. Egypt has since maintained a large Christian population, much of it concentrated in Asyut and Middle Egypt.

Egypt’s Coptic Christians consider themselves indigenous Egyptians, those whose ancestry reaches deepest into the nation’s past. The Arabs who arrived in Egypt in the mid-seventh century found well-established Christian communities and later referred to the conquered land as Dar el-Gibt, ‘home of the Egyptians’.

The word ‘copt’ comes from gibt, an eighth-century Arabic rendering of the Greek Aigyptos, itself derived from Hikaptah, the ancient name for Memphis, the home of Egypt’s main patron god, Ptah. The Coptic language is in fact philologically linked to that of the dynastic era. By the end of the sixth/beginning of the seventh century, Coptic literature flourished and Coptic Church liturgy still offers hints of the ancients’ speech (fig. 54).

**Fig. 54:** Pottery sherd with a Coptic text of a wine receipt, Wadi Sarga, British Museum. (BM EA55788)

**Fig. 55:** Portrait of a man, possible steward or rais (foreman) of workmen. From the 1913/14 Byzantine Research and Publication Fund excavations at Wadi Sarga, British Museum. (AES Ar. 719)
Coptic tradition holds that the Holy Family (Jesus, Mary and Joseph) visited Asyut when they fled their home in Bethlehem, their lives threatened by Herod, the Roman appointed king of Judea. The family took refuge in a hilltop cave overlooking the Nile at Durunka (30 km south of Asyut), their last stop in Egypt before returning to Palestine on receiving news of Herod’s death. The monastery later founded at Durunka remains an important destination for Christian pilgrims.

Just as Christians adapted tombs in the necropolis as places of refuge and worship, communities were established in sections of the mountains where stone had been carved out to use for building (fig. 53). The quarrying began in the Old Kingdom and lasted to the end of the New Kingdom. The great gashes left in the hillside (‘gallery quarries’) formed the backdrop for Wadi Sarga, a Christian settlement 25 kilometers south of Asyut. Wadi Sarga was one of several communities dating to the seventh century that occupied quarried portions of the mountains running west of the Nile.

The outbreak of World War One interrupted excavations at Wadi Sarga conducted by British archaeologist Reginald Campbell Thomas 1913-1914 and his findings were not fully published. But the British Museum holds over 2800 objects Thomas recovered (figs. 54, 56-58, 60) in addition to extensive documentation of the community including architectural plans, watercolours and photographs.
Currently under study, this remarkable collection will deepen our understanding of that period in Egypt’s history when Islam was being introduced but Christianity remained the religion of most Egyptians.

Brave defiance

The Coptic calendar begins in the year 284AD, in memory of the thousands of Egyptians who are believed to have faced death during the reign of Roman emperor Diocletian rather than deny their faith. Asyut had its share of martyrs who refused to honor the Roman gods. Monasticism began in Egypt in the late third century AD, when Christians sought spiritual guidance and refuge from persecution in the desert. After the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312, it was safe to express the faith openly by building churches and monasteries.

Throughout the Byzantine Period (beginning 330AD, when Constantine transferred the capital of the Roman Empire to what is now Istanbul) Asyut’s Christians laid down firm roots, establishing monasteries and convents. These largely self-sufficient religious communities bartered with nearby villages in exchange for medical and spiritual assistance and in times of unrest, they offered shelter to those in need. In the mid-fifth century when Asyut was attacked by the Blemmyes from Nubia, people found safety in the fortress-like White Monastery of Sohag (built 455AD).
Located 100 kilometers south of Asyut, the monumental structure was built in limestone and resembles a Pharaonic temple. Founded by Shenoute (abbot from around 385-465AD) it was the center of a monastic federation comprising some 4000 monks and nuns who occupied separate communities in the hills at the edge of the Nile floodplain. A prolific writer, Shenoute compiled comprehensive accounts of early monastic life in the region.

Egypt figures prominently in the development of Christian orthodoxy and Asyut produced important religious thinkers and writers. In the early centuries of Christianity, one of the most debated issues was how to understand Jesus Christ as both God and man. Dioscorus, the Patriarch of Alexandria, held the view proposed around 448AD by Eutyches, a respected monk from Constantinople, who said that Christ had only ‘one nature’ uniting the human and divine.

Church authorities who gathered at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 decided instead that Christ existed ‘in two natures’. Dioscorus disagreed and declared Eutyches’s interpretation of Jesus’s single nature as orthodox truth, in direct opposition to the emperor in Constantinople. For many decades the patriarchs of Alexandria continued to resist Chalcedon, until 536 when the emperor demanded the appointment of patriarchs who accepted the view of Christ’s two natures. Bishops rejecting it were then all but eliminated, until 575, when local church officials took the unprecedented step of appointing a new, anti-Chalcedon patriarch, named Peter.
Egypt now had two patriarchs, one who supported the imperial stance on the two natures of Jesus, and Peter, who opposed it. Peter began appointing new bishops throughout Egypt who took up residence in local monasteries away from the large cities where their rivals held office. Asyut and its surroundings, including Shashotep (then called ‘Shotep’), was one of the three most important centers of these developments along with Alexandria and Qift, in Upper Egypt.

Under Peter’s successor Damian (577-606AD), a new generation of bishops began composing religious treatises, sermons and biographies of saints, some written in Coptic, others in Greek. The bishop of Asyut was Constantine, who contributed greatly to this literature, often dwelling on the lives of saints celebrated in rural shrines throughout the Asyut region. He and his fellow bishops created a body of religious works that served to legitimize their vision for their Church as the authentic guardian of Egypt’s Christian past.

Life in the necropolis

In the early years of Christianity, members of the new faith sheltered in the necropoleis of Asyut’s Western Mountain and Deir Rifeh, using the tombs as places of retreat or simple dwellings (fig. 22). A rough mud plaster was applied to the walls decorated with ancient Egyptian imagery and inscriptions, so as to cancel what Christians regarded as a pagan past. Instead they left drawings and crosses commemorating Christ’s crucifixion in red ink throughout the necropolis. Asyut’s Christians built at least two monasteries in the Western Mountain necropolis, Deir el-Meitin (‘monastery of the dead’) and Deir el-Azzam (‘monastery of bones’) of which only the ruins of mud-brick walls remain.

Deir el-Meitin, located above the Tomb of Asyuti nomarch Djefai-Hapi I in the lower portion of the mountain (fig. 61), was surrounded by a cemetery demonstrating the extreme poverty of the Christian community. Usually buried without coffins, the bodies were wrapped in cloth and bound with cord. Small children were buried in clay containers. In the northern part of the mountain another cluster of Christian ruins, also called Deir el-Meitin, comprises two tombs converted into chapels around the sixth or seventh century and decorated with Christian imagery, including a winged angel and an image of Christ holding a book inscribed with the words ‘the light’ and ‘the life’. The chapels were documented in 1908, but little remains of the painting.

The ruins of the monastery of Deir el-Azzam stand atop the Western Mountain plateau. A mud-brick wall enclosed a church, living quarters for monks and other small buildings in addition to a water reservoir. A cemetery surrounds the ruins, some 1400 graves dug into the sand and partially cut into the bedrock (usually 2m long, 7cm wide, 70cm deep). Each held one or two bodies, sometimes in coffins with iron rings on each corner for ease of carrying, others simply wrapped
in palm mats. The dead wore a silken undergarment beneath a cloth of white linen that was embroidered with blue silk at the edges and painted with saffron-colored cross. Some women wore earrings to their tombs; others were buried with a wooden comb beneath their heads.

An inscription on a jar found at Deir el-Azzam dated 1156, names the site ‘Apa (father) John of Lycopolis,’ associating it with the monk who called himself ‘a poor man.’ The son of an Asyuti carpenter, John (c.310/320-394/395AD) travelled north to the Monastery of Wadi Natrun, where he studied to become a monk, vowing a life of celibacy, poverty, prayer and service. After studying in other monasteries, John returned to Asyut where he lived as a hermit in the Western Mountain, receiving only a few men and living on a meager diet of fruit.

Known as a seer and prophet able to predict the size of the annual Nile inundation and the subsequent crop yields, John was famous throughout Upper Egypt and beyond. The Emperor Theodosius consulted him on matters of state and John was said to have predicted the emperor’s victory over rivals for the throne of Constantinople.

Deir el-Azzam may be the ‘Monastery of Seven Mountains’ mentioned by Arab historian al-Maqrizi. If so, according to his reports, it was sacked and destroyed in 1418.

Fig. 61: Deir el-Meitin, Western Mountain, 2014, Fritz Barthel, The Asyut Project.

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Early monastic communities often took advantage of existing buildings to establish centers of worship and study, sometimes in the remains of tombs and temples. But poetic justice was brought to bear when monks occupied an abandoned Roman fortress (castrum), originally built to house the troops at whose hands Egypt’s Christians had suffered severe persecution. Located in Manqabad, 7.5 kilometers north-west of Asyut, Romans used the garrison in the third to fifth centuries. It stood empty for perhaps a hundred years before being transformed into a monastery (sixth - eighth century). The size of a small town (92,000m²), the walled garrison featured an immense bathhouse (thermae), soldiers’ barracks, and a large building interpreted as the ‘palace’ of the castrum dating to the late third-early fourth century, that was re-purposed as a church.

An inscription in Kufic Arabic found on the site reads: ‘we have come to the monastery of Abu Naffar’ referring to Saint Onouphrius. A hermit widely revered in Egypt, Nubia, Byzantium and Italy during the sixth-seventh century AD, Onouphrius was probably associated to Manqabad long after his death, only when his cult became widespread. What little is known of the saint comes from the account of a pilgrim Paphnutius,
encountered Onouphrius in the Egyptian desert. Onouphrius, who lived in the fourth century, entered a monastery near Hermopolis in Upper Egypt and spent the next six or seven decades wandering in the desert. A frequent subject of western medieval art, Onouphrius is often depicted with a long flowing beard, wearing only a loincloth made of leaves.

Surveyed by an Italian-Egyptian team in 2011, the remains of the ‘Monastery of Abba Nefer the Hermit’ as it is locally known, include a monumental gate on the east side, another entrance to the southwest, buildings used as living quarters, churches and communal dining rooms (refectories). A large multi-storied structure with massive walls probably served as a shelter when the monastery was attacked by marauding Bedouins. Walls, stairs and some floors were covered in a thick layer of white plaster polished to a limestone-sheen; under it was, in some cases, an older layer of red plaster. Many of the walls held niches finished in red plaster, painted with geometric and vegetal motifs and embellished with decorative elements in limestone.

Egyptian investigations of the site conducted from 1976-2010 uncovered many artifacts, including intact examples of decorated pottery, Coptic tombstones, and coins from the Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods. Ongoing fieldwork by the Italian-Egyptian team will further our understanding of the roles of both late-Roman military installations and early Christian communities in the richly layered history of the Asyut region.

**REFERENCE**

In many parts of the world, events of one hundred years ago are considered ancient history. But for Asyut, a city that has survived four thousand years, with countless plot twists and developments along the way, a century or two ago was only yesterday. While much has been written about Cairo and Alexandria, Asyut’s contributions to the nation’s narrative are likewise essential to understanding Egypt’s character. The following brief survey of recent centuries highlights the city’s development and the material legacy of its inhabitants.

Contested territory

Egypt became an Ottoman province in 1517, when the soldiers of Istanbul’s Sultan Selim I gained the upper hand over the Mamluks who ruled Egypt and Syria. But the Mamluks (the so called ‘slave kings’ of Turkic or Circassian background who were trained from childhood as warriors and equestrians) were not entirely defeated. Mamluk skirmishes with Ottoman forces and their rivalries amongst each other resulted in havoc in Cairo, and often exile to Upper Egypt, with Asyut as a favourite hide-out.

Geographically speaking, Asyut belongs to Middle Egypt, but historically the city was viewed as the boundary between Egypt’s Lower (downriver) and Upper (upstream) realms. During Mamluk times, Asyut was the administrative center of both Middle Egypt and Upper Egypt, which was known as the ‘high country’ (Sa’id). While Ottoman governors established a firm grip on Middle Egypt, the Sa’id proved to be a thorn in their side, a rebellious territory dominated by Bedouin, especially the Hawwara, a Berber tribe from north-west Africa that tended to ignore all authority except its own. It was not until 1576 that an Ottoman governor was installed in Girga (140 kilometers south of Asyut), the region’s de facto capital. For administrative purposes, the Ottomans divided Upper Egypt into twenty districts, each with its own kashif reporting to the governor and responsible for tax collection.

Throughout the 1600s, Asyut remained a sleepy provincial town. There were a few merchants but the main professions were farming and the manufacture and dyeing of linen, a fabric prized since antiquity. The linen woven from locally-grown flax and colored blue was as fashionable in the region as it was in the markets of Cairo. While it is uncertain when textile production began in Asyut, fine fabrics, including wool, were manufactured and exported from at least the eighth century and linen continued to be sent to Cairo until the mid-1800s.

Aside from wheat, barley, sugar cane, fava beans, lentils and millet (dhura) that served as animal fodder, poppies raised in the Asyut area were processed to make opium, an ancient medicinal remedy (fig. 65). In Asyut, Shutb and other towns along the Nile, warehouses (shuna) were built to store quantities of produce designated as tax payments before shipment to Cairo downriver.)
Entering the 1700s, Asyut’s star was rising owing to its agricultural productivity and renewed trade with the kingdoms of Sudan. The city’s population of around 12,000 was comprised of Muslims (80 percent) and Copts (20 percent). Asyut’s merchants were Muslims, as were boatmen, weavers and water-carriers. Christians worked as accountants, goldsmiths and candle-makers in addition to keeping vineyards and selling wine.

Historians refer to the 1700s as Upper Egypt’s ‘great Bedouin century’, when Hawwara leaders successfully defeated the Ottoman overlords, operating from their capital Farshut, just 48 kilometers south of Girga. In the mid-18th century Sheikh Humam Yusuf established a semi-autonomous rule, controlling taxation from Asyut to Aswan in addition to the lucrative trade routes between Upper Egypt and the Sudan and between Qena and the Red Sea port of Qusayr.

Several new mosques were built in Asyut during this period, in addition to a market place for grain trade (suq sultani). Outside the gates of the well-fortified city, another market was held on Sundays. Craftsmen and traders offered local products like cloths, opium and pottery (fig. 66). There were Syrian and European products brought from Cairo and imported goods, some of which may have come from as far away as India via the Qusayr route. The caravans arriving from Sudan brought all sorts of coveted items, the most valuable of which were the tens of thousands of men and women sold as slaves.

Upper Egypt’s Bedouin interlude ended in 1769, when Mamluk chieftain Ali Bey al-Kabir ousted the Ottoman governor in Cairo and seized control of Upper Egypt following a definitive battle near the strategically important city of Asyut.

**Fig. 65:** Opium seller and customers in an Asyut bazaar, watercolour, William James Müller, c.1839, British Museum. (BM 1878,1228.124)

**Fig. 66:** Wheel-thrown pottery water bottle (kulleh), with blue and red glaze, Asyut, early-20th century, British Museum. (BM Af1981,14.17)
The French came next, in 1798, led by Napoleon Bonaparte who dreamt of shortening the route to Asia via a waterway that would one day be known as the Suez Canal. Members of Napoleon’s expedition were impressed by Asyut’s ancient architecture and admired the palm groves and orchards of fig, apricot, pomegranate and citrus to the north of the city (fig. 67). His well-armed troops took Asyut easily, but managing the fellahin (farmers) of Upper Egypt, weary of foreign interference, proved difficult. The French failed to subdue the region and after three years, the British, who had plans of their own for Egypt, forced Napoleon out.

Reawakening

In 1801, while warring Mamluk and Ottoman factions vied for the territory, Asyut was struck by plague that reportedly left only a portion of its population alive. In 1809, the new Ottoman viceroy, Mohamed Ali (appointed in 1805), sent his son Ibrahim to reestablish order, and the city’s fates shifted yet again.

The 20 year-old Ibrahim made Asyut his headquarters, building an imposing residence near the city gate and a villa in the city’s port of Al-Hamra, where he had his own private dock. A skillful administrator and general, Ibrahim left his mark on the city, building a diwan (administrative office) from which to operate an expanding bureaucracy and a spacious town square (midan) where troops could gather and parade to impress the populace.

Ibrahim’s presence made Asyut the capital of Upper Egypt but the city’s newfound prestige came with stricter government control. Aside from stringent tax collection, the state set the prices on all the region’s products, reducing farmers’ and traders’ profits.

Along with money, Mohamed Ali needed manpower to accomplish his goal of modernizing Egypt. In 1820, he sent Ibrahim to Nubia and Sudan to defeat the local kings and ensure a steady supply of slaves to bolster the army’s ranks.
When these weren’t enough, Ibrahim started drafting fellahin. To train the reluctant new conscripts, Mohamed Ali hired a French military commander, Soliman Pasha al-Fransawi (né Joseph Anthelme Sève) who worked alongside the ruler’s personal guard of Mamluks. Tensions rose and in 1824 the farmers of Qena rebelled but they were swiftly punished and the conscription process continued.

Asyut was entering a new economic era. Factories were established for the production of saltpeter, cotton and indigo. The leaves of the flowering indigo plant yield a dye that was considered a luxury item by Egypt’s former Greek and Roman occupiers (and remains a sought-after modern commodity owing to its use in making blue jeans, though a synthetic version is now available). In 1816 Mohamed Ali brought an Armenian specialist from Bengal, where the highest quality indigo was grown, to improve local production.

Governors and prominent citizens contributed to the city’s renewal with a mosque, a hammam (bath-house) and a covered bazaar (qaysariyya; fig. 68) such as those found in Cairo, the prototype of the modern mall. Asyuti merchants sold linen, wool, opium, leather, pottery wares (figs. 66, 69) (including pipe-bowls for which the city was famous; fig. 70) and Sudanese goods to Cairo traders in exchange for goods from Syria and Europe.

**Fig. 68:** Meeting with representatives from the Ministry of Antiquities in the wikala (hostel for merchants), Asyut, 2016, Matjaz Kacicnik.

**Fig. 69:** Rooster-shaped kulleh (water bottle), Asyut, 1900-1927, British Museum. (BM Af1981,14.116)

**Fig. 70:** Pipe bowl in burnt black earthenware, Asyut, mid-19th century, Victoria and Albert Museum. (C.83-1957)
New docks were built in Al-Hamra to handle shipments of food and other cargos. Thanks to increased construction, brickmaking became a booming business and a new industry – ship building – was born from the growing demand for river-going trade and travel. Asyut became known for its shipwrights, navigators, crews, and workshops for outfitting fishing boats, *dahabiyyas*, ferries and barges. An American traveler who visited Asyut in 1836 remarked how the city became an island during flood season with boats anchored outside the walls (fig. 71). The elevated causeway (*gīsr*) that connected Asyut year round to its port, Al-Hamra, (2.4 km away) was lined with acacia and sycamore trees.

**A new day**

In the mid-1800s Asyut was among the most intensively farmed provinces in Egypt. Home to the county’s largest rural population it was a thriving regional capital and a pillar of the national economy. Fourteen minarets graced Asyut’s skyline and in addition to the outlying fields, the city was surrounded by gardens.

Asyut’s old fortifications remained partly intact and neighbourhoods with labyrinthine streets and alleys were gated and guarded at night when people out walking were expected to carry their own lanterns. The upper class included the families of former *kashifs* (mostly of Turkish origin) followed by the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) and merchants, both Muslim and Copt. A safe, prosperous and
pious city, Asyut developed institutions aimed at benefiting citizens. Building inspectors ensured that older structures were maintained or at least not a danger to pedestrians. There were labour organizations, craftsmen’s guilds and committees of merchants that set the fair market value of city real estate.

As the nineteenth century progressed, Mohamed Ali’s descendants continued his modernization project. Asyut’s Western Mountain necropolis was quarried intensively and the dressed stone from tombs that had survived for millennia was repurposed in factories and government-sponsored buildings. Mohamed Ali’s grandson Ismail established a nationwide mail service in 1866 and Asyut soon had its first post office. In 1874, the national railway system, whose construction began in 1851, reached Asyut, connecting it to Cairo. These and other efforts, including the Suez Canal (opened in 1869), were necessary but came at a cost. To control the Canal as a gateway to global trade and the fastest route to their eastern colonies, the British occupied Egypt in 1882 and remained for over 70 years.

Heavily indebted to European banks, Egypt’s ruling family began selling portions of its vast properties. Prominent Asyuti citizens purchased large tracts of farmland and by the early 1900s they filled a new suburb with their brightly decorated villas (fig. 72), gardens, cafes, restaurants and hotels. These wealthy landlords, some of whom relocated to Cairo and Alexandria, directed their private fortunes towards a range of enterprises that would shape the nation well into the twentieth century.
Following the Officers Revolution of 1952, Farouk, the last king of the Mohamed Ali dynasty, was forced to abdicate. President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s subsequent project to redistribute the wealth, sequestrating large properties from their owners and giving small land parcels to the fellahin, was never fully implemented and its results are still unfolding.

Asyut now extends from the foot of the Western Mountain to the Nile, covering over five kilometers of the river’s western bank. With a population of around half a million, the city hosts the first and largest university in Upper Egypt and is the ancestral home of one of Egypt’s largest Coptic communities. The view from the Western Mountain has changed dramatically owing to urbanization but the panorama is still remarkable (fig. 73). While the city occupies the foreground, the north and south remain carpeted with the fields that fed generations of Egyptians and helped build the Egypt of today.

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Intelligent cultivation

Egypt’s fate has always been tied to the Nile; its annual floods lent legitimacy to rulers in times of plenty and tested them in times of drought. In antiquity, labour was paid for in grain and other foodstuffs so that a poor harvest could signal both famine and rebellion. The river provided ample drinking water for the country’s small population but planning was required to ensure crop productivity. Pioneers in the field of hydraulic engineering, the Egyptians developed irrigation systems using dams, canals, and dykes that were deployed throughout the country, including in the rich alluvial fields of Asyut.

Water management was deemed so important that it figured in the texts of the ancients’ Book of Dead, where the deceased was instructed to declare his or herself innocent of all sins, including that of wasting water or interfering with its fair distribution: “I have not diverted water at its season; I have not built a dam on flowing water,” (Spell 125).

A dyke, or levee, is a barrier that may serve to contain flood waters to protect land or to redirect the water via manmade channels for the purpose of drainage or irrigation. Dykes may likewise be equipped with dams to control the amount of water flow at specific times. The work of maintaining irrigation systems was traditionally handled on a local level. Baladi dykes were those built and managed by the rural communities.

In 1200AD, Abu al-Makarim, a Coptic priest and historian described Asyut’s 31,000 acre expanse of cultivation, Egypt’s largest, saying “there is no finer bed of river mud on the face of the earth… nor any that has a sweeter smell.” Around this time, the state became involved in irrigation infrastructure. Public (sultani) dykes were engineered and maintained by the state, represented by the provincial governor in cooperation with neighbouring villages.

The ġisr, or elevated road connecting Asyut to al-Hamrā, may have been an ancient dyke that continued on the west side of the city to the foot of the Western Mountain. Portions of this east-west dyke may be the same as the one mentioned by the historian al-Sakhawi who noted that [Mamluk] Sultan Jaqmaq (r.1438-1453) built or restored the dyke “from the mountain to the river.” An arched bridge (qantara) incorporated into a portion of the dyke was located near Bāb al-Maġdūb, the eastern city gate, allowing water to flow beneath it (fig. 67).

A sultani dyke documented in the mid-1500s ran for nearly ten kilometres parallel to the Nile, beginning several kilometres south of Shutb and ending on the east side of

Fig. 74: Arched bridge (qantara) near Majzub Square, downtown Asyut, 2016, Ilona Regulski.
Asyut. In the late 1600s, the region’s irrigation network consisted of two strong dykes, one upstream in Abūtīg, the other downstream in Asyut, with several balādī dykes in between. The disappearance of those balādī dykes during the early nineteenth century converted the area between Asyut and Abūtīg into an immense pond (hawd al-Zannār). In the flood season, this new hawd formed around the slightly elevated towns of Durunka, Rifeh and Shutb and was still being used for irrigation purposes in the early 20th century.

Under the reign of Mohamed Ali, longitudinal dykes were erected all along the Nile to control the inundation of adjacent farmland. The effort and expense involved in creating and maintaining such structures reflected the importance to the state of ensuring the land’s productivity. Likewise the British, who occupied Egypt in 1882, invested heavily in irrigation infrastructure, engineering a system of Nile dams extending from the Aswan Dam (1902) to the Delta, including the first Asyut Dam, also completed in 1902.

Owing to the construction of the Aswan High Dam (completed in 1970) the Nile flooded for the last time in 1964, ending the agricultural cycles that had prevailed for millennia. Today’s Agricultural Road, running parallel with the Nile along its west bank, follows the course of the old dykes, a reminder of the days when managing land and water resources was viewed as a top priority and a crucial aspect of good governance.

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The Sudanese connection

Trade routes between Asyut and Sudan existed from at least the Old Kingdom (c.2731-2205 BC) as evidence collected in the Western Desert (including pottery and petroglyphs) attests. The desert offered an alternative means of reaching Egypt for traders and travelers who wished to avoid the Nile Valley, where they were more likely to encounter bandits. The oasis of Kharga in Egypt’s Western Desert (234 km southwest of Asyut) acted as a crossroads between Egypt, Sudan, Libya, central and western Africa.

The Romans equipped portions of the desert routes with fortresses, some of which may have been built on the remains of Pharaonic forts, another indication of how these routes were valued and protected in antiquity. Trade between Asyut and Sudan following the route called the Darb al-Arbain (‘forty-day road’) was disrupted at various points in history, but in the late 1600s, the caravans were back in action, greatly adding to the city’s fortunes.

The caravan’s arrival in Asyut was cause for both excitement and trepidation. Its presence could nearly double the city’s population and handling the surge of
humanity, animals and goods presented a huge logistics challenge. In 1817, a French traveler, Frédéric Caillioud, observed the caravan’s entry to Asyut, whose population was around 20,000. Aside from 500 camels laden with goods, there were 16,000 people associated with the convoy, many of them jallabas, or travelling merchants from Asyut and Cairo, but 6000 were Sudanese captives fated to be sold in the markets of those cities as slaves.

According to Caillioud, “they had been travelling for two months in the deserts, in the most intense heat of the year [and arrived] meager, exhausted, [with] the aspect of death on their countenances.” The journey on the ‘forty day road’ in fact lasted two to four months across harsh Saharan terrain. The 1770 kilometer-long trek began in Darfur in southwestern Sudan and moved northwards to Kharga, the last watering station before reaching Asyut’s markets.

A British traveler, W.G. Browne accompanied the caravan south in 1793, a trip that took four months, and listed the goods carried in this direction:

- Amber beads; tin in small bars; coral beads; carnelian; false carnelian; beads of Venice; agate; rings, silver and brass for ankles and wrists; carpets, small; blue cotton cloths of Egyptian fabric; white cotton ditto; Indian muslins and cottons; blue and white cloths of Egypt called melayes; sword blades, straight, from Kahira; small looking glasses; copper face pieces or defensive amour for horses’ heads; fire-arms; kohl for the eyes; coffee; silk, unwrought; wire, brass and iron; small red caps of Barbary; light French clothes…silks of Scio; silk and cotton pieces of Aleppo; shoes of red leather; black pepper; writing paper; soap of Syria.
Returning north in 1796, the caravan delivered:

Slaves, male and female; camels; ivory; horn of the rhinoceros [for sword hilts]; teeth of the hippopotamus; ostrich feathers; gum; pimento; tamarinds made into round cakes; péroquets [parakeets] in abundance, and some monkeys and Guinea fowl; copper, white, in small quantity."

For every ten camels bearing products to market, one carried food, i.e. beans for people and straw for the animals.

Edward William Lane in his Description of Egypt (1826-1827) likewise noted slaves as the main commodity arriving from Sudan, in addition to ostrich feathers, gum Arabic and “whips of hippopotamus hide.” The more prosaic textiles, spices, metals, scents, and beads that made their way to Sudan in exchange were apparently sought-after essentials.

Organizing and leading caravans of this size required superb management skills, a tough constitution and (probably) saintly patience, but the monetary rewards were worth the effort. The caravan leaders (khabirs) were greeted on arrival at Kharga by the local kashif who presented them with fur-lined cloaks as gifts of appreciation and recognition. This was least they could do, considering that the taxes collected on these imported goods made the governors of Upper Egypt some of the richest in the country. Well into the nineteenth century Asyut enjoyed the benefits of interaction with Sudan, including its recognition as one of Egypt’s greatest trade emporiums.

Fig. 78: Map showing the northern part of the Darb al-Arbain (‘forty-day road’), Map of the Nile Provinces from Railway terminus at Siût to Berber. Scale, 1:1,013,760, (London, 1884).

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Living History
The people of Shutb tend to see their town as little different from the 253 others in the Asyut governorate. On the surface Shutb has much in common with its neighbors. Its population of 16,673 (in 2006) is largely young (68 percent are 30 years-old or younger) a demographic reflected throughout Egypt. As is typical of the region, most of Shutb’s inhabitants are involved in agriculture (36 percent). And like other towns in the area, Shutb possesses a range of modest amenities (a post office, railway station, school, clinic, mosque, water tower and electricity-company) mostly located on the main paved road (fig. 80).

Yet despite these similarities with other towns of its size, Shutb is far from ordinary. Perched atop the remains of ancient Shashotep, capital of the 11th Upper Egyptian province from 2000BC onwards, Shutb has been continuously inhabited for four millennia. Shutb residents are aware that their town is steeped in history but only recently has it attracted the kind of study that can illumine its past and feed the local appetite for details.
Parts of the settlement mound constituting Shutb’s historic core are accessible to study, enabling archaeologists to track the various stages in the town’s development (fig. 32). Today’s Shutb represents the latest addition to a long, rich narrative that the British Museum Asyut Project is exploring in collaboration with its residents. Fieldwork in the Nile Valley has traditionally focused on the cemeteries of Memphis and Luxor, alongside the temples further south but Shutb offers a rare opportunity to document the deep past alongside a living history.

While appealing to local interests and benefiting from local knowledge, the aim is to map, preserve and present cultural heritage in a manner that embraces the past while keeping an eye to the future. Whereas archaeological excavations were once conducted primarily as academic ventures or salvage missions, the hope is to create a new model for sustainable fieldwork where a shared understanding of local heritage may influence the community’s decisions concerning its study and preservation.

**Building Shutb**

Shutb’s center is densely populated owing to both the slight elevation that protected it from the Nile floods and the residents’ wish to preserve the outlying land for farming. Here as elsewhere in Egypt, preferences in construction materials remained unchanged until relatively recently. Quarried stone, an expensive material, was used largely for temples and tombs, buildings designed to last for eternity. Mud-brick, an economical alternative, was used for all manner of structures. The exceptional thickness of mud-brick walls uncovered by the British Museum team in Shutb’s archaeological layers suggests that the building served some state or palace function (fig. 93). Ordinary houses were also made from mud-brick but with smaller rooms and less monumental walls.

Throughout Middle and Upper Egypt, houses were built with mud-brick, an accessible and durable material made from a mixture of topsoil, straw and water.

**Fig. 81:** Mixture of topsoil, straw and water buffalo dung shaped with simple wooden moulds, al-Mote’a/2017, Khadega Farouk.

**Fig. 82:** Mud-bricks drying in the sun, Asyut region, Khadega Farouk.
buffalo dung, shaped with simple wooden moulds (fig. 81) and left to dry in the sun (fig. 82). Imminently suitable to hot, dry climates, mud-brick structures are simply built (using palm trunk and palm midrib-reinforced ceilings) and easily expanded into two or three stories to accommodate growing families, while providing considerable insulation against heat and cold. Shutb houses are mostly built in lightly-fired brick, considered affordable and an improvement over traditional mud-brick. But for pragmatic and cultural reasons, the preferred materials are fired-red brick and steel-reinforced concrete which allow for taller structures occupying a smaller footprint, providing a greater amount of living space. Buildings like this reflect an urbanized present, whereas mud-brick is associated with a rural past.

Mapping heritage

Most of the modern houses in Shutb are one to three story structures, largely (72 percent) owned by the people who occupy them and often built with extended families in mind. A single family typically shares the building expense, with siblings and their families occupying separate floors. These modern buildings are usually dressed in a cement-based plaster and sometimes equipped with balconies.

With the support of the Asyut Governorate and in collaboration with the British Museum, Takween Integrated Community Development, a Cairo-based group specialised in urban development, conducted a historical town survey

Fig. 83: Takween ICD Architects documenting the traditional houses, 2017, Khadega Farouk.
in Shutb (fig. 83), identifying 19 architecturally significant buildings dating to the first half of the 20th century. These one or two-story residential buildings feature ornamental (fired) brick facades with European style shuttered windows and wooden ceilings, similar to some houses found in Asyut (fig. 84). The interlocking geometric motifs of their facades bear a striking resemblance to those incorporated in a silver and black thread fabric traditionally produced by the women of Asyut, known as tally (figs. 85-86).

Fig. 84: Vernacular architecture, Shutb, 2017, Matjaz Kacicnik.

Fig. 85: Detailed brick facade, Shutb, 2017, Matjaz Kacicnik.

Fig. 86: Silver and black thread fabric, known as tally, Asyut, British Museum. (BM Af1995,08.2)
In addition to separate buildings of this kind, thirteen connected facades of attached traditional buildings that contribute to the character of Shutb’s historic core were documented, as were the meeting and market places that contribute to the town’s public life.

Another group of buildings likewise dating to the early decades of the 1900s incorporates neo-classical features such as those found in villas in other provinces, including columns with ornate capitals and enclosed balconies with balustrades, features that signaled the wealth and prestige of the homes’ owners (fig. 87). Aside from European architectural elements, these buildings comprise traditional features such as a private inner courtyard and an upper-level open terrace overlooking it.

Most of Shutb’s examples of vernacular architecture have deteriorated over time and many face demolition so that they may be replaced by taller structures. To call attention to the possibility of preserving these buildings as part of the town’s material legacy, Takween ICD organized activities uniting Shutb residents with architects, British Museum team members and local Ministry of Antiquities’ representatives.

Fig. 87: Early-20th century villa, Shutb, 2017, Matjaz Kacicnik.
Shutb is currently undergoing infrastructure improvements, namely a sewage system to replace the septic tanks that collect waste water from most homes. Part of the discussion with Shutb residents focused on how to avoid the unintended damage to archaeological remains and older buildings this much-needed new infrastructure may cause.

**Fresh eyes**

The British Museum team encountered eagerness on behalf of Shutb’s residents to share and enhance their knowledge of local history, a topic that is often overlooked in educational curricula or media programming focused on the national narrative.

Several activities were organized to help people reconnect with their heritage, one involving young people who interviewed their elders about the town’s past and recorded their oral histories. Groups of young people were invited to the archaeological excavation site, where British Museum and Ministry of Antiquities team members explained the working process.

Takween architects toured Shutb with young residents, discussing ways they might present their town to visitors as guides (figs. 88-89). Other youths...
spent time with a group of artists called Cairo Urban Sketchers, walking around Shutb and drawing whatever caught their eye (fig. 90).

Children (age 7-12) and young people (age 16-20) took part in drawing and painting classes where elements of Shutb’s vernacular buildings were copied or integrated into new artwork. Storytelling sessions focused on a work of ancient literature, “The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant” (dating to the Middle Kingdom), about a farmer who is robbed on his way to market and demands justice, speaking persistently and convincingly until his cause is won.

These activities raised awareness around the town’s material legacy, inspiring dialogue about the question of what is considered valuable and therefore worth preserving (fig. 91). The outcomes of these encounters were presented in exhibitions of drawings, paintings,
collage and theatrical performances by Shutb’s young citizens held in the Shutb Youth Club (fig. 92).

The journey of research and rediscovery on behalf of the people of Shutb and the British Museum team is being visually documented as the basis for a series of short films. These too, will belong to Shutb’s history, recording town residents, young and old, as they share their perspectives and experience their surroundings in new ways.

Fig. 92: Decorating personalised versions of the arousa (bride), a traditional motif found in Shutb’s vernacular architecture, 2018, Ahmed Mostafa.

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Unless you are surrounded by desert, no matter where you are in Egypt, history always lies quite literally, beneath your feet. Some Egyptians call their country ‘a house of many stories’ referring to the layers of habitation representing diverse eras stretching back five thousand years. Little wonder that each locale has its legends regarding past events, some based on fact others on fancy or in most cases, a combination of both.

One of the stories Shutb residents tell concerns the nearby town of Durunka. It seems that a certain rivalry existed between the neighboring towns in times past, aggravated by a love story between a handsome prince of Shutb who married the beautiful daughter of Durunka’s king. As one version of the story has it, the smitten princess left her home against her father’s will; other say she was spirited away by the prince in the hope she might one day share his affection.

In all events, to punish the town that took his daughter, the king of Durunka employed an unusual method of destruction. The king (or his soldiers, depending on who tells the story) used a large convex glass lens to concentrate and direct the sun’s searing
rays to Shutb, causing it to burst into flames not once but seven times. Shutb residents claim that a layer of blackened soil lies at some depth beneath the town's surface, the ashen remains of the conflagration and proof of the King of Durunka’s wrath.

The story of Shutb’s burning echoes a tale told by the historian Ibn Duqmaq (d.1407) who claimed that Nebuchadnezzar II, king of the great city of Babylon caused a fire that lasted for generations and turned Shutb into a ‘red hill’. Ibn Duqmaq does not mention how the fire began, but notes that the city was rebuilt beside its original location. Turkish traveller Evliya Celebi, who visited Shutb in the 1600s, described it as:

*An old but still thriving and prosperous settlement built on top of a red mountain. In ancient times, there was a strong fortress on this mountain, and the remains of some of its structures are still visible today. On the eastern side of this red mountain are ruined caves where a man dare not go lest he be stricken with terror. The quarter located on this mountain is called Valley of the Birds.*

It is uncertain whether Shutb had been rebuilt prior to Celebi’s visit, as Ibn Duqmaq maintains. Parts of the historian’s account were inaccurate, since Nebuchadnezzar II (634-562 BC) never invaded Egypt, though he did defeat the Egyptian forces and their Assyrian allies at the Battle of Carchemish, on what is now Syria’s northern border with Turkey. It has, however, been said that Shutb’s kôm looks reddish, perhaps owing to a high concentration of iron oxides in the soil, and is still sometimes referred to as kôm al-Ahmar (‘the red tell’) though other sites in Egypt also bear that name.

As for the convex lenses, whether or not their use for starting fires was recognized in Nebuchadnezzar’s day, it was common knowledge by 424 BC, when Greek playwright aristophanes mentions this function in his comedy, The Clouds. The British Museum coincidentally holds the oldest known example of what some believe to be an optical lens ground from rock crystal, the so-called Nimrud Lens (750 BC) found at the Assyrian palace of Nimrud in modern-day northern Iraq (BM 90959).

That Shutb was damaged or destroyed by fire at some point in its history remains unproved but what is certain is that the residents of today’s town live peacefully side by side with their Durunka neighbors and their former rivalries, whether real or imagined, belong to the distant past. The story, however, has not been forgotten. Residents of the two towns make jokes about the incident and when a fire breaks out in Shutb, some blame it on the one that raged long ago, claiming it was never entirely extinguished.

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Dankoff, R., N. Tezcan, M.D. Sheridan. 2018. Ottoman explorations of the Nile: Evliya Celebi’s ‘Matchless pearl these reports of the Nile’ map and his accounts of the Nile and the Horn of Africa in The book of travels. London.
The stories of important personages who lived long ago may be told and retold so many times that details are lost or added in the telling. But the impact of these individuals’ lives and the qualities or achievements embodied in their story was strong enough to survive the passage of time. Such is the case with the Tadrus of Shutb, or Theodore as he is also known in Greek and Coptic sources. Members of Shutb’s Coptic community claim that there were once many churches in their town, but today’s center of worship is the Church of the Martyred Prince Tadrus al-Shutby.

According to the town’s account, Tadrus’s father John was a Shutb man who was recruited to the army of Roman Emperor Numerian (283–284 AD) and fought in his battle with the Sassanids near what is now Al-Mada’in, Iraq. Son of a noble Shutb family, John married the daughter of one of Numerian’s generals. John wished to raise their son Tadrus as a Christian but his wife, a member of the Zoroastrian faith, refused and insisted that John convert. Instead John left her and his young son and returned to Shutb.

After Numerian’s rule, when Diocletian became emperor, Tadrus joined his army and rose in the ranks. Wishing to see his father, he took leave and travelled to Egypt where he was received as a ‘Prince of Antioch’ (Antakya, Turkey). Reaching Shutb, Tadrus rejoiced to find his father but their time together was brief. John died within days of their reunion. The people of Shutb commemorated Tadrus’s visit by erecting a pillar near the Nile carved with tributes.

Tadrus returned to Diocletian’s army, was appointed ruler of an Eastern province and at some point, embraced his father’s faith. Legend has it that Tadrus saved the children of a widowed woman from being killed by a snake or dragon and he is consequently depicted, like Saint George, on a horse in the act of defeating the deadly beast. Despite Tadrus’s loyal service, Diocletian, who feared Christianity’s rising popularity, had him tortured and killed for refusing to renounce his faith. In keeping with Tadrus’s wish to be buried near his father, his body was returned to Shutb where the Church now bears his name.

Fig. 94: Wall painting depicting at centre ‘the Three Children in the Furnace’ from the Book of Daniel with a Coptic text below naming the ‘The sixty martyrs of Samalut’ and the donors. Framing the scene and in a different style are painted the martyred saints Cosmas (left) and Damian (right) and their three brothers labelled here Anthemos, Leontios and Euprepios (lower center); the so-called ‘Daniel Villa’ located 2km north of Wadi Sarga, 6th-7th century, British Museum. (BM EA73139)
In Greek-Christian sources, Tadrus is conflated with Theodore Stratelates (‘the general’). Born a Christian in ‘the East’ (possibly Syria) Theodore was drafted to the army, then arrested for his faith in Amasea (northern Turkey, near the Black Sea) where he was stationed. His case was postponed but when freed Theodore set fire to a pagan temple and was again arrested. While imprisoned, angels visited Theodore to cheer him but he was martyred, burnt to death, while still a young recruit.

Another version of Theodore Stratelates’ story relates that his father (Jonas) was a Christian from Shutb, drafted by the Roman army and posted to Antioch where he married the daughter of a nobleman. Jonas refused to adopt his wife’s beliefs and after their son’s birth, she sent him away. But like his father, Theodore became both a Christian and a soldier.

On a journey to visit his father in Egypt, Theodore came to the town of Euchaites (Turkey) where people worshipped a dragon or serpent and offered it the sacrifice of a child each year. Outraged by this barbarism, Theodore killed the dragon (or serpent). In Shutb Theodore was reunited with his father and brought him back to Antioch where they lived happily until Diocletian issued an edict outlawing Christianity. The pagan priests of Euchaites denounced Theodore, who was arrested and burnt to death.

Yet another version of the saint’s biography conflates ‘Theodore the Oriental’ (i.e. born in Syria) with ‘Theodore the General’, whose story matches that of Tadrus al-Shutby, with some additions. In this version, Theodore took all the soldiers in his charge to a river where they were baptized as Christians. For this act of conversion, he was exiled and later martyred.

Theodore’s story has been told in several languages, including Greek and Latin. In Shutb’s Church of the Martyred Prince Tadrus al-Shutby, his memory is preserved and honored as an example of bravery and unshakeable belief.

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Further reading


Further reading


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Asyut Guardian City

Few cities can claim as long and illustrious a history as Asyut, in Middle Egypt. Continuously inhabited for at least five thousand years, it ranks among the world’s oldest urban centres, yet only now has Asyut begun to receive the scholarly and public attention it deserves. The ‘guardian city’ straddled the border between Upper and Lower Egypt, defending the frontier, and was often the decisive battlefield in ancient power struggles. Despite the conflict, the Asyut region was a trade emporium and cultural hub, where countless works of art were conceived and replicated for millennia. Recent collaborative, multifaceted fieldwork projects underway in the Asyut necropolis, the neighbouring village of Shutb and nearby Manqabad have shed new light on this once neglected region. Presenting both fieldwork findings and insights gained from the study of Asyut’s material culture preserved in museums and institutions, this publication aims to share an appreciation of Asyut’s outstanding achievements with readers around the world.

Front cover image: South-facing view of the alluvial plain from the Western Mountain, 2014, Ilona Regulski.