

Middle Kingdom tombs of Asasif: archaeological fieldwork in 2017



Abstract: The recent works in the 2017 season at the North Asasif Necropolis have led to the discovery of Middle Kingdom burial assemblages, as well as funerary equipment dated to the Third Intermediate Period. Besides, the cleaning work conducted in the funerary complex of Meru revealed more materials from the Late Roman Era, which proves the existence of the Coptic hermitage inside the tomb. This new archaeological evidence provides an important insight into the development of the North Asasif Necropolis during the Pharaonic era and in later periods. The fourth season of the archaeological fieldwork at the site focused on seven Middle Kingdom funerary complexes: tomb of Khety (TT 311), MMA 509, MMA 511, MMA 512, MMA 514, MMA 515 and tomb of Meru (TT 240).

Key words: Theban Necropolis, North Asasif, Middle Kingdom, rock-cut tombs, Khety, Meru

The 2017 archaeological season of the Asasif Project under the auspices of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw focused on seven Middle Kingdom funerary complexes from the North Asasif necropolis: TT 311 (tomb of Khety), MMA 509 and MMA 511, MMA 512, MMA 514, MMA 515 and TT 240 (tomb of Meru) [Fig. 1]. The main research objectives of this campaign involved an investigation into the origins of the non-royal Middle Kingdom tomb architecture and funerary equipment, and a study of the intrusive burials from later periods at the site. The work in funerary complexes MMA 509 and 511 was concentrated on documenting tomb architecture and studies of finds from the previous campaigns and will not be reported here.

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TOMB OF KHETY (TT 311)

In the 1922/1923 season Herbert E. Winlock, working on behalf of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, discovered the resting place of the Treasurer Khety, a high court official of the king Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II (Winlock 1923: 14–19, Figs 1, 4, 6–12; 1942: 68–71, Fig. 7, Pls 15–16). The funerary complex of the Eleventh Dynasty noble was one of the richest tombs constructed in the Theban Necropolis during the Middle Kingdom.

Behind a doorway opened a high and lofty corridor, walled with fine white limestone, carved with scenes from Khety’s life. Originally, the walls were decorated with hunting, funeral and agricultural motifs (Winlock 1923: 16–18). In ancient times the walls were destroyed and the stones reworked into bowls by those salvaging the stone. After four thousand years Winlock found hundreds of decorated fragments from the wall decoration in the debris inside the tomb.



Fig. 1. The North Asasif Necropolis; inset, general plan of Deir el-Bahari with the location of the Middle Kingdom tombs and general view of the tombs in the cliff f with the Temple of Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II in the foreground (PCMA UW Asasif Project/drawing K. Andraka, photo P. Chudzik)

Winlock's workers left a large dump extending along the east side of the courtyard, near the doorway to the tomb. Recent clearing of the funerary complex of Khety, which included this dump, uncovered several finely decorated limestone fragments: scenes of everyday life and funeral scenes, limestone fragments with representations of Khety seated on a chair in front of the offering tables and offering lists. New fragments of limestone door jambs and a lintel came to light. The surface of these architectural elements were painted red with black streaks imitating granite. The owner of the tomb with his name and titles was depicted on the door jambs.

The disturbed remains of Eleventh Dynasty grave goods were also found in the debris overlying the east side of the tomb courtyard. Winlock's dump contained a number of pottery vessels and wooden models. Retrieved model fragments included, among others, fragments of offering bearers, that is, mostly arms painted red and yellow, miniature models of offerings, like the foreleg of an ox [Fig. 2 right] and a jar with lid, as well as fragments of oars constituting model boat equipment [Fig. 2 left].

Museum excavations in 1922/1923 led to the discovery of fragments of a wooden statue (Winlock 1942: Pl. 36; Hayes 1953: 164, 210).¹ Winlock identified a wooden



Fig. 2. Fragmentary wooden artifacts from the Tomb of Khety: parts of boat equipment on the left, model of an ox foreleg on the right (PCMA UW Asasif Project/photo M. Jawornicki)

¹ Two fragments of a wooden statue found by Winlock are now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York: a wooden head (MMA 26.3.104a) and an arm of a female figure (MMA 26.3.104b).

head as the image of the tomb owner, but it is more likely that it represents the head of a female figure (Arnold 1991: 28–29, Figs 39–41). More fragments of wooden statues were recovered this season from the dump, making it clear that the cult chapel had contained not one but two figures. The first statue, life-sized, belonged to Khety [Fig. 4], the second, which was much smaller, was presumably his wife.

A mud seal impression discovered this season in the debris of the courtyard [Fig. 3] reveals an oval-shaped image on the surface, partly damaged in the corners. The impression was also damaged in part. It presents a tripartite design with crosswise scroll design and two identical scroll and spiral motifs on the two ends. The latter may well be a schematic representation of



Fig. 3. Mud seal impression from the tomb of Khety (PCMA UW Asasif Project/photo M. Jawornicki)



Fig. 4. Fragments of a wooden statue of Khety: from left, left ear, nose and mouth, and thumb of left hand (PCMA UW Asasif Project/photo M. Jawornicki)

the Hathor fetish. This decorative motif is attested in material dated from the late Old Kingdom to the Eleventh Dynasty (see Brunton 1937: Pl. LXIX(7); Ward 1978: Pl. XI, Nos 287–288; Shubert 1998: 78, No. 33). In pressing down the seal, the mud was held between the fingers to press down the seal, leaving fingerprints of the seal's owner. The reverse of the sealing suggests that it was once applied to the door of the tomb or the wooden box brought by the offering bearers during the funeral. There are only a few examples of early Middle Kingdom Theban sealings, coming from tomb MMA 509 (Winlock 1923: 15) and the tomb of Meketre (TT 1101) (Winlock 1955: 35, Pl. 69), as well as seal impressions on Hekanakhte's letters (Winlock 1922: 34, 38, Fig. 38; James 1962: 45, Pl. 9).



Fig. 5. Fragmentary mummy plaque representing falcon-headed Qebehsenuef (Asasif Project/photo: M. Jawornicki)

Apart from Middle Kingdom tomb equipment, Winlock's dump contained a large number of burial assemblages from later periods. Third Intermediate Period material is represented by clay shabtis, fragments of wooden chests or coffins(?) and cartonnages. One of the most interesting objects from this time, however, is an unusual fragment of an amulet of one of the Sons of Horus. The falcon-headed Qebehsenuef amulet is made of a small piece of linen and coated with gesso on both sides [Fig. 5], indicating consequently that it is not a fragment of cartonnage decoration. It resembles other known glazed composition amulets of Sons of Horus (see Petrie 1914: 39–40; Andrews 1994: 45–46; Aston 2009: 389, 394). The newly discovered small plaque is shown in typical mummiform profile without the arms. The pierced side holes reveal that the amulet was incorporated into the bead netting or, more likely, stitched on to the bandages over the torso of the mummy. Cartonnage figurines replaced the wax Sons of Horus by about 750 BC.

TOMB MMA 512

The tomb was discovered by Winlock between 1920 and 1923.² During his excavations only the upper layers of the tomb fill were removed and left in the courtyard. Current fieldwork focusing on funerary complex MMA 512 started in 2013 (Chudzik 2015: 241–243) and was now continued with the aim being to clear accumulated rock debris from the entrance corridor and the chambers inside the tomb.

2 Some of the objects from this tomb were moved to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, e.g., stela of Nebeni (26.3.237), builder's seal and cord (22.3.72) and sections of a broad collar (27.3.150a-b).



Fig. 6. Cult chapel, niche and entrance dromos of tomb MMA 512 (PCMA UW Asasif Project/photo P. Chudzik)



Fig. 7. Limestone altar from tomb MMA 512 (PCMA UW Asasif Project/photo M. Mackiewicz)

A long entrance corridor led to a squarish rock-cut chamber that had originally acted probably as a funerary cult chapel [Fig. 6]. The entrance to the chamber was carved near the southeastern corner of the room. Opening in front of the chapel entrance was a short, unfinished corridor, possibly intended as a niche. The entrance dromos was cut through the thin layers of limestone rock in the western side of the cult chapel. The burial chamber was cut at the bottom of the dromos. There is no doubt that the tomb was left unfinished, presumably because of death of the owner (see Chudzik 2015: 243 and note 3).

Removal of rock debris from the main corridor revealed vessel pottery sherds, textiles, fragments of a bull skull, remains of wooden models as well as a limestone



Fig. 8. Finds from shaft tomb 514-3: left, clay shabti figurine; right, the Sons of Horus scene represented on a cartonnage (PCMA UW Asasif Project/photo M. Jawornicki)

altar [Fig. 7]. The altar is decorated with three small basins: two on both sides of the *Htp*-sign and a bigger one crosswise. The newly discovered altar is similar to that from Kom el-Akhdar, which is dated to the late Eleventh or early Twelfth Dynasty (Fischer 1976: 12–14, Figs 5, 6) and to the Eleventh Dynasty altar from Karlsruhe Museum (H416) (Wiedemann 1886: 98–

99). Artifacts from the cult chapel and burial crypt included wooden fragments of chests and sticks, vessel pottery sherds, textiles, mud stoppers, animal bones and fragments of wooden models. The assemblage can be dated to the Middle Kingdom. Cleaning work was undertaken also in the courtyard, yielding further fragments of Middle Kingdom grave goods.

TOMB MMA 514

Work in the entrance corridor of funerary complex MMA 514 resulted in the clearing of five shaft tombs. The main tomb was constructed for one of the Middle Kingdom court officials (Chudzik 2015: 244–245; 2017: 189). In consequence of the cleaning, it became evident that the entrance passage had been modified (shaft tombs 514-1–514-4) first during the New Kingdom and then again during the Third Intermediate Period.

Plundered remains of early Eighteenth Dynasty burials were found in MMA 514, mostly in the shaft at the end of the main passage. Limestone canopic jar fragments, remains of a black painted coffin with yellow decoration and a small fragment of faience bowl with Nile motifs were discovered in the debris.

Intrusive remains of burial assemblages from the Third Intermediate Period (mostly Twenty-second and Twenty-third Dynasties) were found in all the shafts of the main tomb corridor. These included various faience and clay shabtis, pieces of broken coffins and cartonnages [Fig. 8], as well as fragments of pottery vessels

(see Aston 2009: 269ff). A large quantity of funerary textiles of different sizes and in varying condition came from the fill of the shaft tombs. Inscriptions have been observed on some of the studied textiles.³ One of these contains the name of Khonsu-ir-aa, which is attested, according to Aleksandra Hallman and Filip Taterka, on two statues, one in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (Bothmer 1960: 10–11, Pl. 9; Freed, Berman, and Doxey 2003: 178) and the other in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore (Steindorff 1946: 14, 54, Pls 29, 114). Both objects are dated to the Twenty-fifth Dynasty and were discovered in Karnak (for some other examples of Twenty-fifth Dynasty inscribed linen, see Strudwick 2000: 255–256; Hallmann 2015a: 250–252, Fig. 4; 2015b: 130–131, Fig. 17).

Funerary complex MMA 514 also yielded a large number of human remains, both skeletonized and mummified, which were studied this season by Roselyn A. Campbell. A preliminary count gives the minimum number of individuals at nine (Campbell 2018, in this volume).

3 Textiles from the Asasif Project are being examined by Dr. Aleksandra Hallmann; she and Dr. Filip Taterka (both Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures, Polish Academy of Sciences) are also studying the inscriptions found on these textiles.

TOMB MMA 515

Work in funerary complex MMA 515 was concentrated on completing the architectural documentation of the inside of the tomb and the courtyard. Test trenches in the courtyard outside the tomb were aimed at uncovering the original Middle Kingdom surface. The first trench (1.50 m by 7.00 m) was aligned with the main doorway axis, shifted to the west. The second (2.20 m by 15.00 m) was cleaned along the west wall of the courtyard. In both trenches remains of mud mortar were discovered 10–15

cm below the current ground surface. Similar mud mortar covered the surface of the courtyard in tomb MMA 509. Further research will show whether this mortar was found in the entire courtyard or just in the section between the walls and the avenue.

Studies of grave goods collected in the previous season, mostly various decorated coffin and cartonnages fragments, indicated the presence of intrusive burials from the Third Intermediate Period in this complex.

TOMB OF MERU (TT 240)

The burial crypt and sarcophagus decoration in the Eleventh Dynasty tomb of Meru was recorded and studied. Examination of the assemblage of finds coming from the Middle Kingdom cult chapel and the small niches in the main passage revealed a later occupation of the tomb.

Relics of plaster and painted images of crosses, as well as late Roman pottery recovered from the recent cleaning activities, made it reasonable to assume that the tomb was turned into a Coptic hermitage at one point.

RECAPITULATION

In the light of the latest discoveries, the four main phases of the Middle Kingdom North Asasif funerary complexes can be identified. This part of the Theban necropolis, comprising tombs constructed in the Eleventh and Twelfth Dynasties, appears to have been reused once in the early Eighteenth Dynasty (tomb MMA 514), and again in the Third Intermedi-

ate Period and early Late Period. The last phase was connected with the activities of Coptic monks, who appropriated some of the chambers for living purposes (Chudzik 2016: 298). The only tomb not to be usurped in later times was the early Middle Kingdom funerary complex MMA 512, which was left unfinished.

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