

# MIDDLE KINGDOM TOMBS OF ASASIF: ARCHAEOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES IN 2015

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**Abstract:** Investigations in the North Asasif necropolis, conducted by a team of Polish archaeologists in 2015, focused on three Middle Kingdom complexes: MMA 508/TT 311, MMA 511, and MMA 517/TT 240. A surface collection of finds from the courtyards was studied and prepared for storage, and artifacts from inside the tombs were documented. The overall picture of illicit penetration of the complexes in later periods and their reuse, mainly in the Third Intermediate Period and the Late Period, is supported by the finds. Moreover, proof of the presence of Coptic monks was found in tomb MMA 517/TT 240.

**Keywords:** Theban Necropolis, Middle Kingdom, Asasif, Khety, Meru, rock-cut tombs

The North Asasif necropolis is located on the northern side of the valley of Deir el-Bahari [Fig. 1]. The first tombs of high officials were cut into the rock face during the reign of Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II. A team of Polish archaeologists from the University of Wrocław first investigated this area in 2013. The Asasif project is now part of the Polish–Egyptian Archaeological and Conservation Mission to the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, run by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw.

In the second season in 2015, research concentrated on three funerary complexes: MMA 508/TT 311, MMA 511, and MMA 517/TT 240 [see Fig. 1]. Their construction is dated to the Middle

Kingdom. Exploration in this area in the 1920s by the Egyptian Expedition from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York allowed the names of the owners of two of the three tombs to be established. One of them was Khety, buried in tomb MMA 508/TT 311 in the western part of the cemetery. The other tomb, MMA 517/TT 240, located in the eastern part, belonged to Meru (Winlock 1923: 14–19, Figs 1, 4, 6–12; 1942: 68–71, Fig. 7, Pls 15–16; Porter and Moss 1960: 330–331, 386–387; Soliman 2009: 95–108). Both were high officials at the court of king Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II (Allen 1996; 2003: 18–19). The architecture of these tombs represents corridor type IIa (Arnold 1971: 43–46).

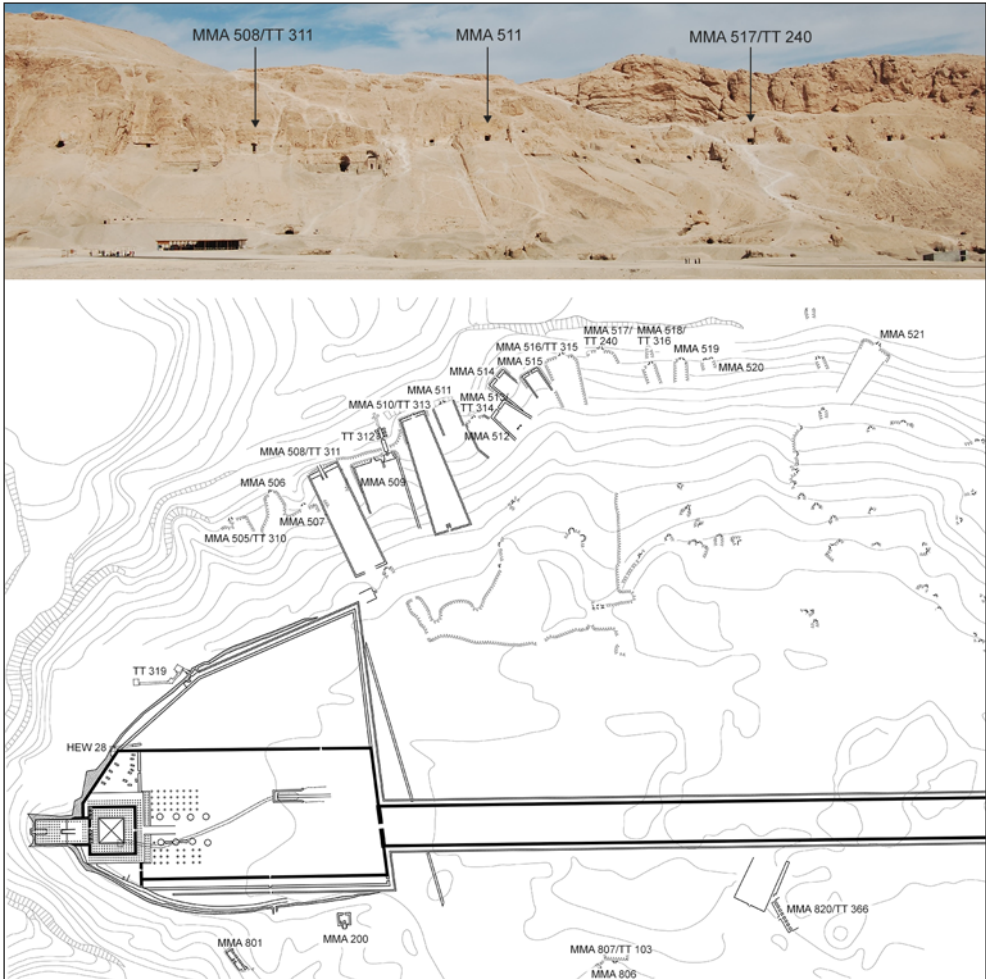


Fig. 1. Temple of Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II at Deir el-Bahari and tombs in the North Asasif necropolis; top, the necropolis of North Asasif seen from the south (Plan K. Andraka; photo P. Chudzik)

Team

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The first step was to collect for safe storage artifacts found scattered on the slopes and in the tomb courtyards. The finds consisted of grave goods, mainly ushabti

figurines, fragments of wooden chests or coffins, and pottery, associated with the primary burials from the Middle Kingdom and the reuse of the tombs in later periods.

## TOMB OF KHETY (MMA 508/TT 311)

The courtyard of the funerary complex of Khety was surrounded by walls (see also Dodson and Ikram 2008: 207b). A wall constructed of irregularly-shaped stones stood in the lower part of the slope, lining the courtyard on both sides. The upper section of the courtyard was framed with a brick wall that reached the facade. The entrance to the courtyard, located in the lower part of the slope, led up to a brick facade, behind which were the rock-cut parts of the tomb. In 1923, Herbert E. Winlock in the passage between the walls of the facade discovered an altar, made of red Aswan granite (Winlock 1923: 14–15, Figs 4, 6, 7; 1942: 69, Fig. 7, Pl. 15) [Fig. 2]. It was still in place after 4000 years, mounted on the clay steps leading to the entrance. The top surface of the altar was divided into two parts: one for the actual offerings and the other functioning as a symbolic space, which featured representations of sacrifice offered in the course of ritual practices as well as the text of the *hṯp-di-nsw* formula (Chudzik 2016a: 102, Fig. 60):

Left side:



Right side:



Translation:

1. An offering, which the king gives, to Osiris, lord of the West, great god, lord of the necropolis,
2. a voice offering of bread and beer, ox and fowl and (every) beautiful thing for him in his tomb of the necropolis,
3. for the venerable one, treasurer Khety, the justified.
4. An offering, which the king gives, to Anubis who is upon his mountain, the one in the *wt*, lord of the sacred land,
5. so that he might be properly buried in the beautiful West,
6. for venerable one, treasurer Khety, the justified.

[Translation P. Chudzik]

The entrance located in the center of the brick facade of the tomb led to a lofty corridor. It was closed with the first pair of wooden doors,<sup>1</sup> the other pair being located at the end of the entrance corridor. The floor of the corridor was paved

<sup>1</sup> Winlock discovered a door of this kind in tomb MMA 509 (MMA 23.3.174) (Winlock 1923: 15, Fig. 15 *in situ*; 1942: 70, Fig. 15; Hayes 1990: 257).



Fig. 2. Granite altar of Khety  
(Photo M. Jawornicki)



Fig. 4. Limestone naos discovered in the Tomb of Khety (Photo M. Jawornicki)



Fig. 3. Fragment of a limestone block with cartouche of Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II  
(Photo M. Jawornicki)



Fig. 5. Fragment of a limestone block from the sarcophagus bearing the title and name of Khety (Photo M. Jawornicki)



Fig. 6. Limestone bowl made of a re-carved block. Tomb of Khety (Photo M. Jawornicki)

with sandstone slabs, and the walls were constructed of limestone blocks with relief decoration [Fig. 3]. Over the centuries, however, sourcing of the material for the manufacturing of stone bowls [Fig. 6] led to its almost complete destruction. Even so, hundreds of block fragments have been preserved and can be used to reconstruct the scenes from the walls of the entrance corridor. They depicted hunting in the desert, processions of offering bearers, and a list of offerings recorded in front of the table, behind which the deceased was seated. Fragments of decorated sandstone ceiling slabs were also preserved in the tomb. One of the motifs meriting attention displayed white stars on a blue background.

The funerary cult chapel was situated at the end of the corridor. It was a square room with a wooden statue of the deceased, placed in a niche carved in the wall facing the entrance. Fragments of the statue were discovered during excavations conducted by the American expedition (Winlock 1928: 24, Fig. 27; 1942: 13–131, Pl. 36). The walls of the chapel were covered with plaster and decorated with funerary scenes. The decoration was preserved mainly in the southern part of the room. The scenes represent ritual slaughter of cattle, preparation of food, processions of offering bearers, and a pilgrimage to Abydos (Chudzik 2016a: 73, Fig. 39). Moreover, smelting of copper tools is depicted in the eastern part of the south wall [Fig. 7]. The decoration technique used in the chapel is characteristic of the provincial Theban style. Therefore, construction must have started in the early phase of the reign of Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II, before the reunification of the country.

A small sandstone basin, used for purification rites, was discovered in the

center of the chapel. A similar function was probably fulfilled by stone basins, originally situated in the niches of the facade of Horhotep's tomb (MMA 513/TT 314) (see Sauneron 2000: 36, 88) impressions of which the Polish team discovered in the 2013/2014 season. It is likely that there was a limestone altar between the sandstone basin and the niche, where the sacrifice was offered. Apart from the already mentioned granite altar, two others, made of limestone, were discovered. One of these was unfinished and yet it had still been left in the tomb. A limestone naos [Fig. 4], which probably was not part of the original equipment, was also found in the chapel. It should possibly be connected with a later reuse of the tomb.

The entrance to the burial part was located in the niche, aligned with the long axis of the complex. A brick wall was



Fig. 7. Decoration of the funerary cult chapel of Khety (Photo M. Jawornicki)

probably erected there after the funeral and covered with plaster, like the stone walls of the niche. A similar location of a hidden entrance is known from the tomb of Dagi at Sheikh Abd el-Qurna (MMA 807/TT 103; Davies 1913: 30, Pl. XXIX). Next, a short diagonally sloping corridor led to a small square chamber. It played the role of a false burial chamber and was still partly filled with limestone debris. The rubble contained remains of grave goods from the Middle Kingdom and later periods. Moreover, the fill yielded fragments of a large limestone slab that had closed the entrance to another diagonal corridor, which led to another false burial chamber.

A small niche was carved in the northwestern corner of the room, lined up with the east–west axis of the tomb. Its dimensions indicate that no more than one

coffin could have been placed there. The niche was probably related to the reuse of the tomb in the Third Intermediate Period or in the Late Period.

The floor in the eastern part of the room was situated at a noticeably lower level than in its western section. This lower level was connected with another diagonal corridor, which led in a direction opposite to the other corridors.

The sarcophagus chamber was carved at the end of this passage. The walls of this room were built of limestone blocks covered with painted images of offerings and the offering list [Fig. 8]. The northern wall depicts, among others, weapons and ornaments, the southern one garments. The east and west walls bear representations of food and beverages. An oblong concavity, more than 1 m deep, was carved in the



Fig. 8. 3D model of the burial chamber of Khety  
(Documentation and processing M. Caban)

stone floor in the eastern part of the room, and the limestone sarcophagus was placed in it. The bottom of the sarcophagus and fragments of blocks from its walls had remained fixed in place for four millennia. The decorated limestone blocks discovered in the chapel and the first false burial chamber indicated that the sarcophagus was decorated in the upper part of its walls with one line of text containing the *hṯp-di-nsw* formula. The text was painted in black on the inner surface, and on the outside it took the form of relief decoration painted a turquoise color [see *Fig. 5*]. The sarcophagus was placed on a layer of sand and mud bricks, which had been used probably to level the rock foundation. A piece of wooden coffin and fragments

of a number of Khety's arrows were also discovered in the fill.

Examination of the tomb and its courtyard brought the discovery of grave goods (fragments of chests and coffins, human and animal bones, potsherds) from different phases of the functioning of the complex. A big accumulation of Middle Kingdom undecorated pottery cones, one cubit long, was found near the facade, on the western side of the courtyard. Fragments of such cones were also found in other parts of the courtyard.

Khety's funerary complex was reused during the Third Intermediate Period, which is confirmed by the presence of clay ushabti figurines and fragments of cartonnages.

## TOMB MMA 511

The funerary complex MMA 511 is located in the central part of the North Asasif necropolis [see *Fig. 1*]. The front part of the complex consisted of a courtyard of trapezoid shape, surrounded with stone walls. The entrance to the tomb was carved in the upper part of the slope, in the center of the rock facade. It began with a long high corridor, where the floor was paved with large sandstone slabs. Originally, the two sides of the corridor were framed with walls made of limestone blocks, fragments of which were discovered in the course of the exploration [*Fig. 9*]. As in tomb MMA 509, the slabs covered only the first few meters of the floor (Chudzik 2015: 240). Further in, the corridor was devoid of any remains of sandstone slabs or limestone wall blocks. Two small niches [*Fig. 10*] were discovered in the eastern part of the corridor, but it was difficult to determine whether they were intentional or the result

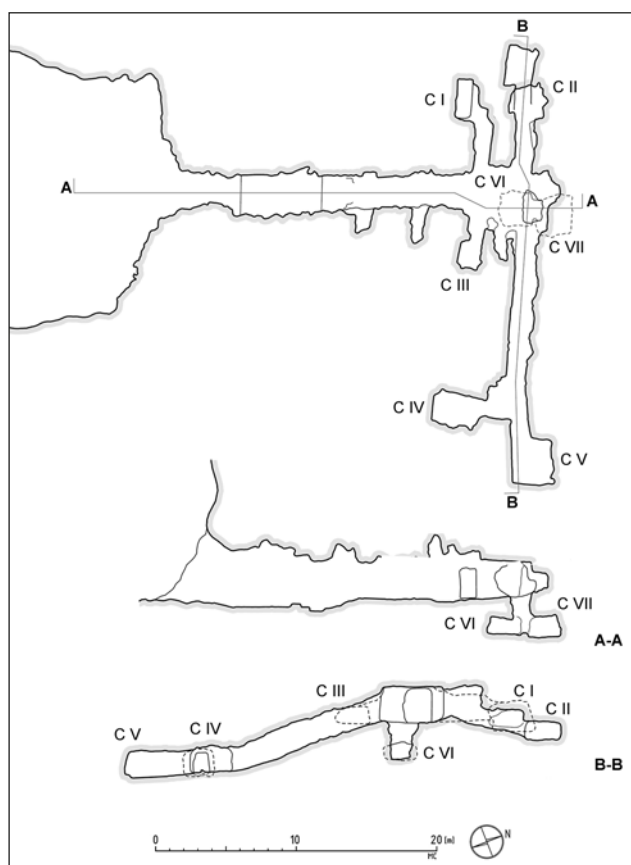


*Fig. 9. Entrance corridor to tomb MMA 511 (Photo P. Chudzik)*

of rock flaking. The rock is of very poor quality in this spot.

A room of irregular shape, possibly intended as a funerary cult chapel, was carved at the end of the entrance corridor. Five passages issue east and west from this chamber and there is a shaft in the center of its floor. Two sloping corridors oriented toward the west lead to burial chambers C I and C II. A concavity of regular shape carved in the floor, aligned east–west, was discovered in burial chamber C I. It could have held a wooden coffin. There are also two corridors which open to the east. One of them leads to

chamber C III. At the end of the other sloping passage is a small room, with entrances leading to two chambers: C IV (on the southern side) and C V (on the eastern side) [see *Fig. 10*]. Between the passages in the east wall of the chapel, there is a small recess in the wall, which could have been the initial part of another, unfinished corridor. The shaft, approximately 3 m deep, was carved in the middle of the chapel [*Fig. 10* section]. At the bottom of the shaft, entrances to two chambers were cut in the rock on both sides: C VI on the south and C VII on the north.



*Fig. 10. Tomb MMA 511, situational plan and sections (Documentation and drawing M. Caban)*



The present state of research is not sufficiently advanced to establish the chronology of each chamber. A similar distribution of a number of short corridors with small rooms carved at the end of each is known from tombs situated in the western section of the North Asasif necropolis: MMA 101, MMA 506 and MMA 507. The last one, discovered by Herbert E. Winlock in 1923, proved to be a mass burial of soldiers killed in battle

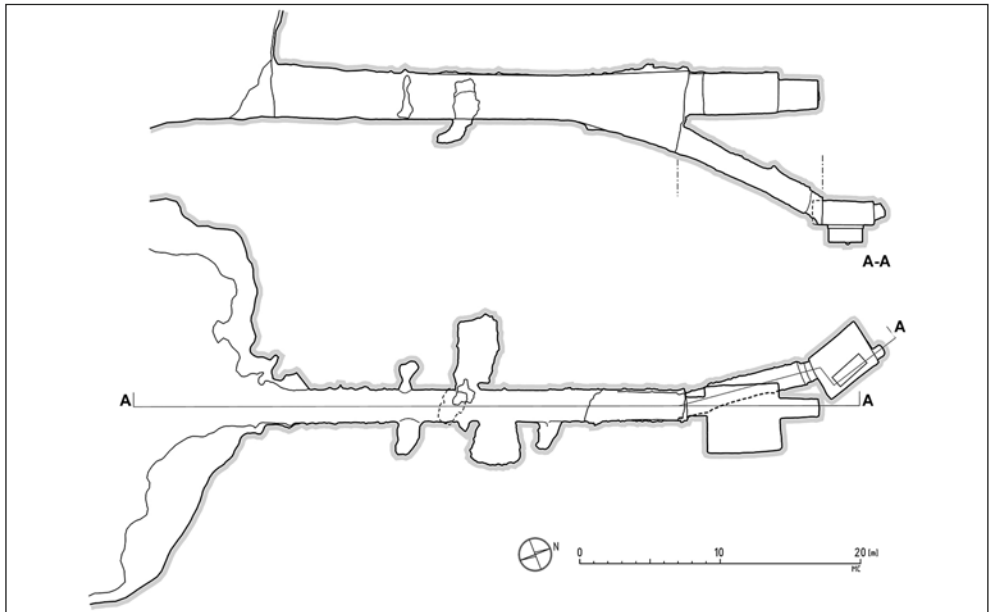
(Winlock 1923: 19; 1928: 11–16, Figs 16–21; 1942: 71, 122–127, Figs 19–20; 1945; Vogel 2003).

Grave goods, mostly from the Middle Kingdom (fragment of clay tray, potsherds) and the Third Intermediate Period (fragments of chests and coffins, cartonnages, and clay ushabti figurines), were discovered. Apart from that, there was a large quantity of mummified human and animal remains, as well as bandages.

### TOMB OF MERU (MMA 517/TT 240)

The third of the examined tombs was the funerary complex of Meru, located in the eastern part of the North Asasif necropolis [see *Fig. 1*].

Meru bore the titles of the royal sealer and the overseer of sealers at the court of Mentuhotep II (Allen 1996: 10).<sup>2</sup> As in the complexes described above, the entrance



*Fig. 11. Tomb of Meru, section and situational plan (Documentation and drawing M. Caban)*

<sup>2</sup> See the limestone stela of Meru at the Egyptian Museum in Turin (Cat. No. 1447) (Schenkel 1965: 240–241; Lichtheim 1988: 63–64, Pl. 3; Klebs 1990: 23, Fig. 14).

was preceded by a big courtyard. At the moment it is difficult to establish whether it was surrounded with walls as no traces of such structures have been discovered so far. The border of the courtyard is indicated by carved rocks in the upper portion of the slope. The rock is so high in this part of the gebel that it was possible to shape the facade without giving it a brick wall. In the center of the facade there is an entrance to a lofty corridor [Figs 11, 12]. Relics of several layers of plaster and images covered with red paint were preserved on its walls (Winlock and Crum 1926: 20, Sites XXI–XXI A). Remains of painted images of crosses can be seen in a few places.

Rooms and niches were carved on both sides of the corridor. They were probably created after the Middle Kingdom, intended as chambers for successive burials. The first niche is located on floor level, 8 m from the entrance on the right. It is a small rectangular recess in the wall, too small to put a coffin in it. Opposite the niche, there is a vertical crack which could have been adapted for use in its lower part, although not for burial due to its inadequate size.

About 2 m to its right there is an entrance to a large room of regular shape. In front of its entrance, a shaft was cut into the floor, 1.20 m deep and leading to a small chamber carved underneath. Such small chambers were used during the Middle Kingdom as places for deposition of wooden models. Similar hiding places for models have been found in several other Theban tombs: MMA 510/TT 313, MMA 516/TT 315, MMA 801, MMA 1101/TT 280, and MMA 1152 (Winlock 1920: 16, Figs 4, 5; 1922: 33, Fig. 31; Górecki 2010: 301, Fig. 5; Chudzik 2013: 194–195, 197).

Another chamber, of trapezoid shape, is situated on the right side of the corridor

[Fig. 12]. The upper part of the entrance to that chamber was coated with clay, in which the impression of a presumed wooden lintel was preserved. Clay remnants were also preserved on the walls and floor of the room. The chamber was probably carved in the Pharaonic period and several hundred years later it was reused by Coptic monks. Fragments of late Roman pottery vessels were discovered in the room.

A square cult chamber was carved at the end of the entrance corridor. The entrance to the chapel is located near the west wall of the chamber and not on its axis. A niche for the statue of the deceased was cut in the wall opposite the entrance.



Fig. 12. Entrance corridor of the tomb of Meru with chamber reused by Coptic monks (Photo P. Chudzik)

An entrance to a diagonally sloping passage was built in front of the chapel. After the funeral it was probably covered with sandstone floor slabs, a few fragments of which were discovered within the complex. The sloping passage clearly bends towards the west and is aligned precisely with the north–south axis.

The burial chamber was carved at the end of that corridor. The walls of the room are decorated with many false door images, religious texts, offering tables, and offering lists. The sarcophagus of Meru [Fig. 14] was carved in the floor in the eastern part of the chamber. The lid, which has not survived, sealed the sarcophagus in a manner that made it part of the room floor. The walls of the sarcophagus were covered with copious images of grave goods: vessels, garments,

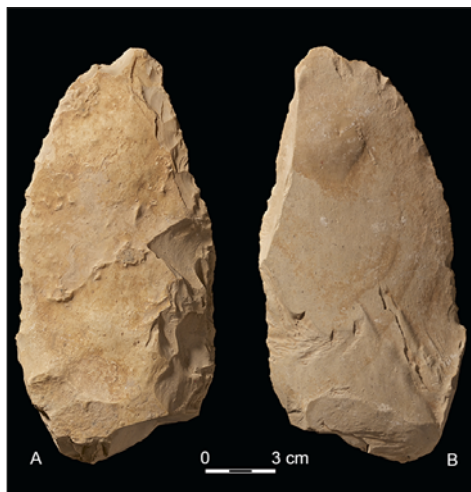


Fig. 13. Flint knife from the courtyard of the Tomb of Meru (Photo M. Jawornicki)



Fig. 14. Sarcophagus of Meru (Photo M. Jawornicki)

jewelry, official's staffs and weapons. Several columns of the Coffin Texts were preserved in the lower register of the west wall. On the other hand, the east wall bore lists of offerings deposited during the funeral. The text of the offering formula devoted to the deceased was recorded in the upper part of each wall (see Allen 2006).

The layout of different features in the tomb of Meru seems to be inspired by the royal complex at Deir el-Bahari (Chudzik 2016b). A similar layout can be observed both in the structure of the cult part: the courtyard and then the entrance passage with the chapel at the end correspond to

the temple of Mentuhotep II, as well as the sloping passage leading to the burial chamber in its sepulchral part.

The material discovered in the course of exploration of the courtyard represents, above all, grave goods from different dynastic periods, starting from the Middle Kingdom. However, the assemblage also contains more recent artifacts, dated to the early Coptic period. Clay ushabti figurines and a ritual flint knife [*Fig. 13*] were discovered in addition to fragments of pottery vessels, fragments of human and animal bones, as well as remains of wooden coffins and chests.

## CONCLUSIONS

Work in three rock tombs of the North Asasif necropolis in 2015 revealed an assemblage of finds representing grave goods from the Middle Kingdom, which could be dated to the reign of Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II. Moreover, a high number of ushabti, cartonnages, fragments of wooden chests and coffins, as well as large

quantities of mummified human remains suggest the reuse of the Middle Kingdom tombs in later periods, mostly in the Third Intermediate Period. The presence of Coptic monks in the tomb of Meru (MMA 517/TT 240) is signified by finds of pottery vessels and relics of wall paintings in the entrance corridor.

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