

Dra' Abu el-Naga – Western Thebes

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An archaeological investigation of a residence necropolis in Upper Egypt (Luxor). The investigation of the necropoleis dating to the Middle Kingdom, Second Intermediate Period and Early New Kingdom. The discovery and documentation of royal tomb complexes dating to the 17th and early 18th dynasty.

Location

The excavation site is situated ca. 700 km south of Cairo, opposite the modern city of Luxor in Upper Egypt on the western side of the Nile. Dra' Abu el-Naga is the modern name of the northern area of the extended necropolis, which served as the burial ground for the ancient Egyptian capital of Thebes (Waset). The name relates to both the modern village and the area, which lies to the north of the village and which has, for the most part, remained untouched by modern occupation. The concession area of the venture lies in this undeveloped part of the necropolis.

History

Dra' Abu el-Naga is one of the longest occupied necropoleis of Ancient Egypt: it was used as a burial place almost continuously between the Middle Kingdom and the early Christian (Coptic) periods, i.e. a period of ca. 2500 years. The oldest graves documented so far date to the end of the 11th dynasty (ca. 2000 B.C.).

During the 17th and early 18th dynasty, kings and their wives were interred here. The social spectrum of the private necropolis ranges from simple burials with few grave goods to the burials of higher-ranking individuals e.g. the High Priests of Amun of Karnak and other high officials.

In the early Middle Kingdom, at the end of the Second Intermediate Period and at the beginning of the New Kingdom Dra' Abu el-Naga was the site of the residence cemetery, as Thebes/Waset had at this time

become the imperial capital and seat of government. Dra' Abu el-Naga's significance as a holy burial ground, which increased with the presence of the royal tomb complexes, resulted primarily from its position directly opposite the Temple of Karnak: The Temple of Karnak is known to have been the main cult centre of Amun from the Middle Kingdom and then became one of Ancient Egypt's most important temples during the New Kingdom.

On the hilltop of Dra' Abu el-Naga stand the substantial remains of the Coptic monastery, Deir el-Bachit and its adjacent cemetery, both of which are located within the concession area of the German Institute of Archaeology, Cairo and had not been investigated until recently. Deir el-Bachit was inhabited by monks between the 5th and 8th century A.D. and was presumably the largest Coptic monastery complex in Western Thebes.

The archaeological investigation of this complex began in 2001 in cooperation with the Ludwig-Maximilian University, Munich (from 2003 as a DFG-Project).

Objectives

The excavation project, which was initiated in 1991, is dedicated to the study of the royal and private necropoleis dating to the Second Intermediate Period and early New Kingdom (13th - 18th dynasty, ca. 1790-1425 B.C.) as, up until recently, little was known about the architecture and composition of graves and funerary practices of this time.

One particular focus of the excavation was the royal tomb complexes of the 17th dynasty. Previous to the DAIK's (German Institute of Archaeology, Cairo) project, the general knowledge of these tombs was based on individual objects, which were part of their funerary equipment, but which lacked any definite provenience (e.g. two gilded wooden coffins and a limestone pyramidion). Such objects were stolen from their tombs during the 19th century and then gradually found their way into the art trade and finally into various European collections.

The burial complexes themselves and their exact location remained undocumented. Consequently one main objective was the localisation of these tombs, the recording of their architecture and the reconstruction of the original context of the objects, which formed part of their burial equipment.

The overlying aim of the research project is the reconstruction of the occupation and development history of the necropolis of Dra' Abu el-Naga.

The archaeological excavation is based on the following questions:

Firstly the clarification of the form and architecture, above all of the Second Intermediate graves, is a particular desideratum. The analysis and evaluation of the architectural features along with the recovered burial equipment and ritual objects aim to enable conclusions about contemporary ritual and burial practices.

Furthermore the incorporation of the individual complexes or rather groups of graves into the necropolis structure as a whole, i.e. processional ways, ritual sites, sites of religious importance, will also form part of the investigation: Were the various tomb complexes interrelated? What was the motivation behind the arrangement of particular graves and the dispersion of specific tomb forms? One further emphasis lies on the understanding of the social spectrum and social distribution pattern of the burials.