

THE ITALIAN-EGYPTIAN PROJECT OF STUDY AND CONSERVATION  
OF THE MONASTERY OF ABBA NEFER, MANQABAD (ASYUT)  
THIRD CAMPAIGN

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The 2014 campaign of the Italian-Egyptian Archaeological Mission at Manqabad was carried out from September 17th to October 21st 2014<sup>1</sup>. It was the first long fieldwork since the beginning of the project; the previous campaigns - carried out between 2011 and 2013 - were in fact brief surveys, strongly affected by the political instability of the country and the precarious security conditions. We were neither able to get access to the store-rooms which house the findings from previous excavations (never published), nor to work on the ground for long enough to start a detailed study of the structures still *in situ* (Pirelli 2014).

Thus the campaign of autumn 2014 was devoted, on the one side, to survey the inventories in the inspectorates of El-Ashmunein and Asyut and begin the study of the findings in the storerooms of El-Ashmunein, and, on the other side, to start the topographical survey and the investigation of the numerous structures still extant on the site.

#### *I PART*

From September 22nd to October 9th, the mission worked on the inventory and on the findings kept in the store-house of El-Ashmunein and on the inventory of the inspectorate of Asyut.

From the analysis of the two inventories (whose main data were translated from Arabic and fed into a data-base), it was possible to determine with some precision the number and nature of the findings, their conservation status and their current location.

In the two inventories, 933 numbers are assigned to materials from Manqabad. The

total of the items, however, is much higher, since several inventory numbers correspond to groups of findings (for the most coins) quite numerous (see below).

#### *The Findings*

The database contains an accurate count of all the findings, which, in the pages of the inventories, are almost always associated to a photograph. We were therefore able to get an almost precise view of the nature and quality of the materials, of which a schematic report is given below.

#### *Stone Elements*

340 stone elements are registered, which include 111 stelae and fragments of stelae in Coptic (Fig. 1) and at least 116 architectural elements of fine workmanship decorated with geometric, floral and zoomorphic motifs (Fig. 2), sometimes with inscriptions, most of them in Coptic; two hieroglyphic inscriptions were also identified: one on a block of the Pharaonic period (Fig. 3) reused for a window frame of the Christian phase (Fig. 4); the other identified on a very blurry photograph of the inventory of El-Ashmunein, and most likely dating to the Ptolemaic period.

#### *Ceramics*

245 ceramic elements are present in the inventories, most of them intact or completely reassembled; they include 116 bowls; 69 amphorae; 59 oil lamps; 31 bottles; 41 pitchers; 28 jars. Except for a low percentage of daily use ware, pottery from the site is characterized by painted or plastic decoration of a high level of craftsmanship (Fig. 5).

#### *Wall paintings*

Numerous paintings, removed from the niches of the housing units and churches, are kept in the store-rooms; they are decorated with vegetal, geometric and zoomorphic motifs, but there are also some figures of saints (Fig. 6) and a beautiful image of the Virgin (Fig. 7). The paintings appear relevant to two different pictorial cycles, which can be

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<sup>1</sup> Members of this campaign were: Rosanna Pirelli (Egyptologist - Director); Paola Buzi (Coptologist - Vice-Director); Andrea D'Andrea (Topographer); Ilaria Incordino (Ceramologist); Marco Barbarino (Assistant Topographer); Anna Salsano (Coptologist); Gabriella Esposito (Egyptologist, Interpreter); Ezzat Salib (Coptologist - Ministry of State for Antiquities); Inspectors from the MSA: Mahmoud Mohamed Aly; Ashraf Mohamed Rashad Jusuf; Ahmed Suleiman Abdel Al.

preliminary dated to the 6th and the 8th century AD.

### *Coins*

In the inventories, 3108 coins are recorded, belonging to different periods: Roman, Byzantine, Abbasid and Ottoman. 103 of them are registered as gold coins, the remaining as bronze or copper coins.

103 golden coins from the Roman and Byzantine period are registered under the unique inv. number 875; 93 of them were transferred to the Museum of Mallawi, the remaining 10 to the Islamic Museum in Cairo.

2155 bronze coins are registered with the unique inv. number 1010; they were found altogether in a jug in 1986, and then transferred to the Islamic Museum in Cairo.

The remaining 850 coins are described mostly as bronze coins with a small percentage of copper coins.

To date, however, very few can be said about this huge amount of coins, as the members of the missions could see only one of them in the store-house of El-Ashmunein: it is a bronze coin from the early Islamic period with a written date “130 of the Hijra” (Fig. 8).

As it was previously alluded, the coins are also the sole category of findings which was moved to museums (except 50 of them kept in the store-room of El-Ashmunein): 2165 were transferred to the Islamic Museum in Cairo; 93 to the Museum of Mallawi.

Unfortunately both museums were damaged in the course of the events related to the revolution and we don't know their current situation. It is hoped, therefore, that a survey can be made as soon as possible, in order to recover the museological information regarding these findings, the damage they underwent and check the current consistency of the two numismatic groups.

After the inventory survey, the study of the materials was started in the warehouse of El-Ashmunein, where 152 specimens were analyzed, catalogued and photographed.

## *II PART*

On 11th October, the fieldwork activities began.

### *The topographic survey*

The walled precinct of the site was acquired and measured with a Total Station, although only three of its sides are nowadays recognizable, the eastern side is in fact missing, probably shot down over time to make way for the construction of the modern village. The actual sizes of the wall are: North 270m; West 343m; the South wall is not linear but with a light convex angle, the two sides being in turn: 270m (east) + 70m (west), all of them together enclosing an area of about 92.000 sq m.

The topographers also started the analyses of the satellite images of the site, recognizing a series of possible alignments in the north-west quarter of the site, running East-West at an average distance of 25 meters from each other (Fig. 9) These alignments are very likely to correspond to some structures currently underneath the surface, which we will investigate as soon as possible. They could be in fact the foundations or the lower courses of buildings for military cantonment of the Roman phase, whose existence is inferred both from the architectural remains in the central area of the site (Pirelli, Buzi 2013; Pirelli 2014), and from the written sources, testifying the presence of a Roman garrison in Lycopolis/Asyut around the end of the 3rd-beginning of the 4th century AD (Pollard 2013).

### *The archaeological survey*

The archaeologists began analyzing the structures which occupy the northern sector of the site. About 90 “kellaiat” (monks' cells), more generically identified by the mission as “housing units” (UA), were observed in detail, their features described and photographed. Total Station acquisition and 3D reconstruction of the structures was also started (Fig. 10).

The “kellaiat” are arranged along both sides of a rectangular complex of about 200m, which has a monumental entrance on the eastern side and probably two secondary entrances along the South side. In front of the central of these secondary doors, a small

church is located roughly in the middle of the northern row of housing unit (Fig. 11).

Four models of UA were recognized:

- 1) Type 1 or Base Type, on two floors (Fig. 12):
  - a. the lower underground floor is composed by a large room with two/three annex narrow rooms on the eastern side;
  - b. the upper/ground floor is composed by a large room with several niches, the most important one (often decorated) on the eastern side;

Type 1 can be further divided into three subtypes, depending on the dimensions of its rooms and is the most frequent of the northern row of housing units.

- 2) Type 2 on two floors, with more various arrangements of the same types of rooms.
- 3) Type 3, double housing unit without underground floor (Fig. 13);
- 4) Type 4, double housing unit with one underground room.

Walls, stairs and some walking surfaces are covered with a thick layer of white plaster imitating a well-polished limestone (Fig. 14); walls and niches are in many cases decorated with geometric and vegetal motifs, and embellished with decorative elements in limestone.

Within the niches located near the entrance of each UA, large vessels and jugs (intact) are in many cases embedded in the masonry.

On the front entrance, all two-story UAs have a decorated window which was to illuminate the underground room (Fig. 15).

In many cases changes to the original plan and/or decoration of the structures were observed. In order to reconstruct the precise chronology of the various phases of the site, that emerged from the fieldwork, the study of the building techniques of the walls of all the architectural structures was also started.

### *Training*

According to the agreement with the Egyptian Ministry of State for Antiquities, all the programmed interventions involved (and will involve in the future) the collaboration of Egyptian colleagues and simultaneously training activities by Italian archaeologists and restorers for young Egyptian colleagues of the local antiquities inspectorate.

### *Conclusions*

The campaign of 2014 made it possible to identify the main architectural structures and propose a typology of the housing units (UA) of the northern sector of the site, where at least two or three building phases were recognized: in some cases existing structures were modified, in others open spaces were re-functionalized to house new housing units and/or service rooms.

The preliminary observation of the finds (especially ceramics, paintings and architectural elements) and inscriptions allowed us to suggest an outline of the history of the site, divided into three main phases of life and at least three others of less regular human presence, which can be summarized as follows: Pharaonic Period (?); Ptolemaic Period (?); Late Roman Period; Christian Period, Phase I: 6th century AD; Christian Period, phase II corresponding to Islamic Period, phase I: 8th century AD; Islamic Period, Phase II, 19th cent. AD (Mahmud II).

Finally, the recurrence of some figures of saints, both in texts and in paintings from Manqabad, testifies a strong cultural and liturgical link between the “Monastery” of Abba Nefer and that of Apa Jeremiah at Saqqara and outline the role of our “Monastery” in the complex religious geography of Egypt during Late Antiquity.

### *Programming the next campaigns and objectives*

Considering the substantial number of findings to be studied and the vastness of the site that requires urgent action of consolidation, we hope for the coming years to be able to count on a larger number of archaeologists and to require the collaboration of architects and restorers.

Program for the next missions is therefore:

- 1) to continue the archaeological survey, focusing on the investigation of the central sector of the site where a series of monumental buildings is located next to another set of housing units;
- 2) to continue the topographical survey for the construction of a detailed map of the site and for the 3D reconstruction of all the architectural structures;
- 3) to continue the study of the artifacts stored in the warehouses of the Supreme Council of Antiquities of El-Ashmunein and Shutbi;
- 4) to start surface collecting of movable finds, especially pottery, to define the

chronological and cultural horizon of the different life stages of the site;

5) to start the architectural survey;

6) to begin rehearsals for the consolidation of mud-brick walls and the restoration of the paintings.

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Fig. 1 - Stelae and fragments of stelae in Coptic



Fig. 2 - Architectural element with vegetal and human decoration and Coptic inscription



Fig. 3 - Hieroglyphic inscription on a block reused for a window frame (see below)



Fig. 4 - Window frame with hieroglyphic inscription (see above)



Fig. 5 - Some examples of decorated pottery



Fig. 6 - Figures of saints from one of the wall paintings



Fig. 7 - Particular of a wall painting with the Virgin



Fig. 8 - Bronze coin of the Abbasid period



Fig. 9 - Plan of the site with the city walls (red line) and the alignments in the North-West sector (black dotted line)



Fig. 10. Details of two housing units taken from the 3D model



Fig. 11 - Perspective view of the small church obtained from the 3D model



Fig. 12 - Two underground views of a Type 1 housing unit



Fig. 13 - Example of a Type 3 housing unit



Fig. 14 - Example of white plaster lining



Fig. 15 - Interior and exterior view of a window