



NEAL SPENCER

## INSIGHTS INTO LIFE IN OCCUPIED KUSH DURING THE NEW KINGDOM: NEW RESEARCH AT AMARA WEST

Between the 1940s and 1970s, a number of New Kingdom Egyptian towns and their associated cemeteries were excavated in Upper Nubia, including Kawa, Sesebi, Soleb, Sai, Amara West and Aksha. Formal temple architecture, inscriptions and elite funerary monuments and artefacts retained the attention of the excavators. Recognising the potential of Amara West, clear from the published Egypt Exploration Society (EES) excavations,<sup>1</sup> the British Museum instigated a multidisciplinary research project in 2008, with the aim to investigate the lived experience of the ancient inhabitants. The project currently comprises excavations in the walled town and its western suburb, investigation of two associated cemeteries and a range of scientific projects centred on changes in the Nile river and landscape, foodways and subsistence strategies, population health and aspects of ancient technology, particularly pottery production.

Magnetometry survey revealed the presence of a series of large buildings fanning out from the western wall of the town (fig. 1); several could be identified as villas on the basis of their plan, with a tripartite arrangement of spaces (Spencer 2009: 50–7). One of these villas (E12.10) has been excavated, with the underlying stratigraphy indicating it was occupied between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> dynasties (fig. 2). Within, a clear differentiation of room function can be discerned, including a set of rooms dedicated to grain-processing and cylindrical ovens, with storage bins in the adjacent courtyard. These bins could hold 3.2m<sup>3</sup> of grain, and archaeobotanical evidence suggests that this was principally emmer wheat, stored in spikelet form (Ryan *et al.* 2012: 102). The rear part of the house features well-constructed brick floors,

a staircase to the roof or upper storey and a room with bed-niche. The presence of villas outside the town wall underlines the stable security situation in Upper Nubia during much of the Ramesside Period, and perhaps also a desire for the elite inhabitants to move to more spacious dwellings, beyond the cramped environment of the walled town.

It is becoming clear that the nature of the walled town changed considerably between the foundation of Amara West, in the reign of Seti I (c. 1306–1290 BC), and the later Ramesside era. The earliest architectural phases are characterised by an urban plan largely following a grid pattern, well-spaced buildings and a significant number of storage facilities, including long magazines with vaulted rooves (e.g. Spencer 2009: 48–50, pl. 3). As the town developed, and perhaps grew in population, there are less large-scale storage facilities, more houses though of smaller size, and narrower alleys between the buildings. Since 2009, excavations have provided evidence that an area (E13) once dedicated to storage, with at least three contiguous magazines, associated with a large staircase for roof access (E13.14), was radically modified during the course of the later 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty. While one of the magazines fell out of use, others were cut through to create space for a sizeable house (E13.7), with the remaining parts becoming a dump for the debris from colour processing. This included considerable quantities of pigment (red, blue, yellow, white, black), sherds used as palettes for mixing pigments, grindstones covered with ground pigment, and crucibles. Some of the houses feature painted walls, typically white or red, though fragments of painted moulded mud architectural elements (torus moulding, cavetto cornice) might attest to the presence of a cult niche in one house (E13.7).

Later still, this area was partly levelled, with rubble fill creating a new building surface, on which a new set of houses was constructed (houses E13.4, E13.5, E13.6, E13.8, E13.9, see also fig. 3). These houses are characterised by sandstone front doors (fig. 4), multi-purpose spaces used for food preparation (grinding installations, bread ovens: fig. 5), staircases for access to the roof and/or upper storey,

<sup>1</sup> Excavations in 1939–9 and 1947–50 revealed a well-preserved sandstone temple, decorated between the reigns of Ramses II and Ramses IX, a large building associated with the successive Deputies of Kush, and two areas of housing within the walled town. A series of tombs and simple graves were also excavated. The excavators did not produce final publications, but archival material has been used to present the town's architecture, the burials and a small part of the ceramic corpus (Spencer, P. 1997 and 2002).

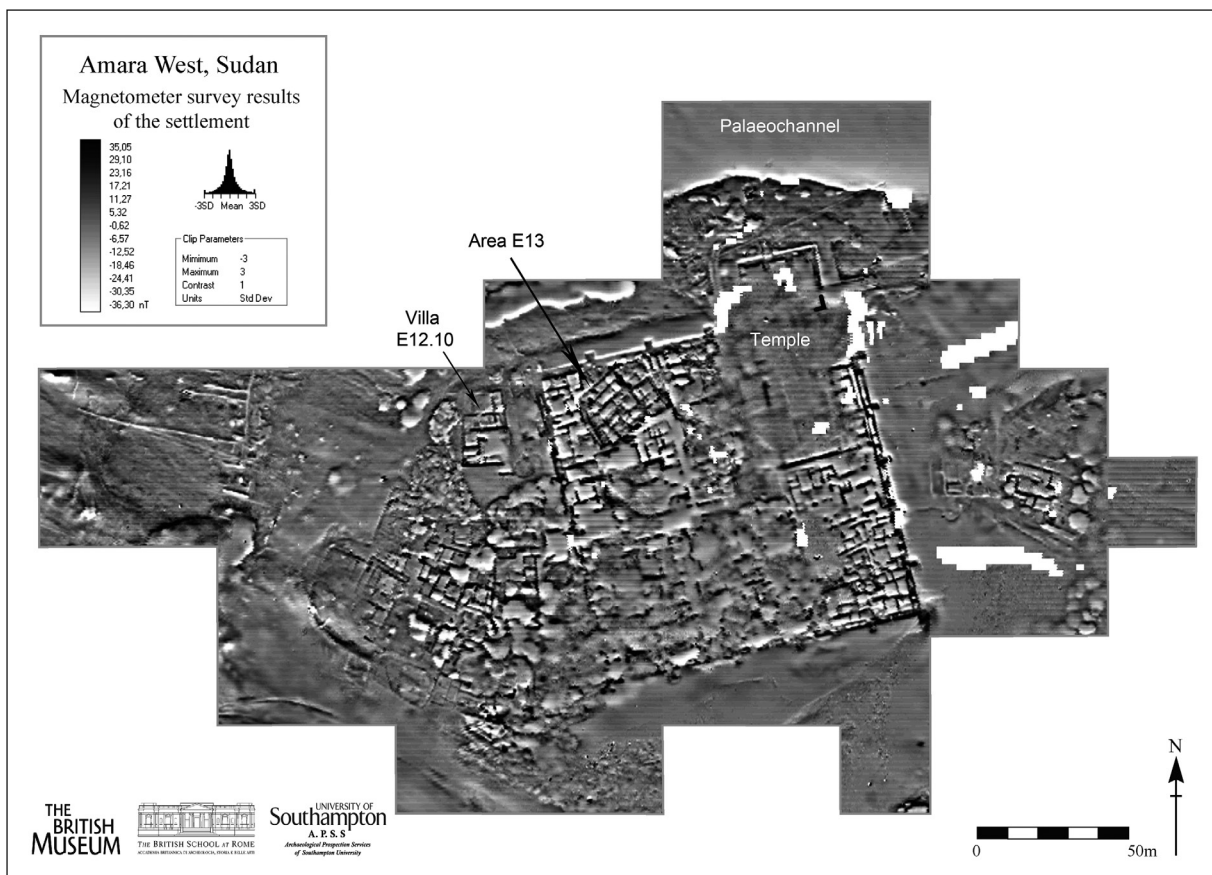


Fig. 1: Magnetometry survey of the town at Amara West (British School in Rome/University of Southampton).

a room with a hearth, no windows (though roof skylights may have been present), and in some cases a *mastaba*-bench. The excellent architectural and depositional preservation makes it possible to track small-scale changes: the frequent laying of new clay floors, the movement of individual features (e.g. grinding emplacements) to new locations within rooms, the blocking up of spaces and, in one case, the subdivision of a large house (E13.3) into two smaller units (E13.3-N and E13.3-S). This subdivision necessitated the construction of a new staircase and front doors to allow dedicated access to the roof and street, respectively. Preliminary analyses suggest that these smaller houses consumed a higher proportion of barley than in the large villa (Ryan *et al.* 2012; fig. 6). The back room of house E13.3-S contained a sandstone anthropoid ('ancestor') bust (fig. 7), still sitting upon a brick pedestal. Alongside the presence of amulets and small stelae, but also the discovery of copies of the *Teaching of Amenemhat* at the site (Parkinson and Spencer 2009), it is clear that elements of household cult, religious belief and elite culture were not dissimilar from that at contemporary towns in Egypt.

The excellent preservation of architecture and occupation deposits, allied with modern excavation

techniques, will allow a reconstruction of a neighbourhood history, and provide an insight into the ambiance and atmosphere of these ancient houses. This should balance the rather static impression we have of New Kingdom houses, conditioned by the short-lived occupation of Tell el-Amarna and the reliance on schematic plans, which convey a sense of stasis, not change. Micromorphological and geochemical analyses of floor and occupation deposits, undertaken by Mathew Dalton (University of Cambridge), should provide even higher resolution insights into changes in the function of spaces at household level.

Though the domestic architecture is overwhelmingly Egyptian, and consistent with that found at sites such as Tell el-Amarna, our project is also investigating how the realities of the colonial entanglement between Egypt and Nubia (Smith 2003) were played out in this important town. One building of distinctive Nubian form (E12.11) was found adjacent to the villa (Spencer 2010), and 3-10% of the pottery found in the settlement consists of hand-made Nubian vessels (Millet forthcoming a/b; fig. 8). Petrographic and chemical analyses of the pottery fabrics is providing insights into the range of local pottery fabrics employed, principally for forms fami-

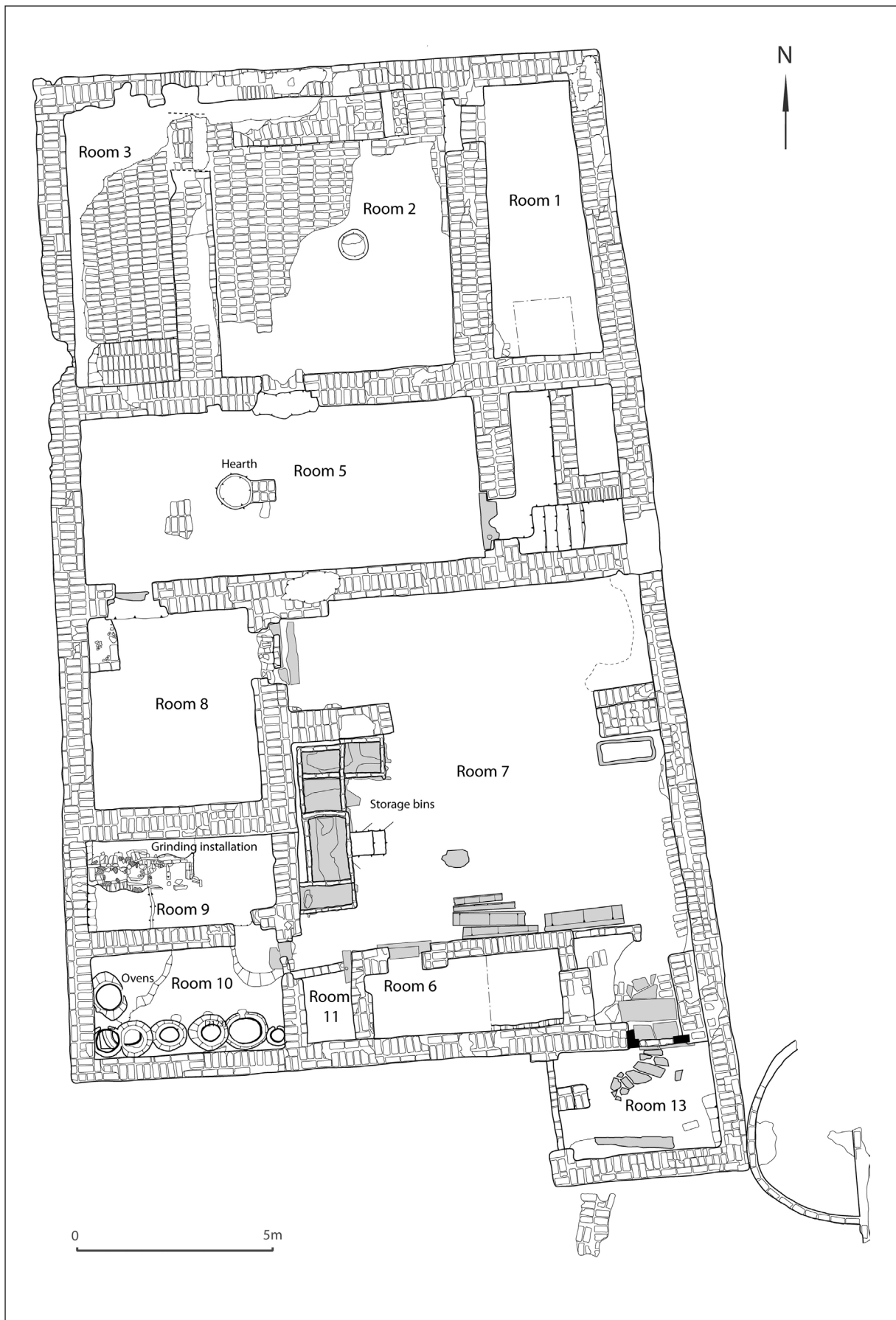


Fig. 2: Plan of villa E12.10



Fig. 3: House E13.8, constructed over earlier courtyard (E13.15) with kiln. View north-east.



Fig. 4: View along street with entrances to houses E13.9 (left) and E13.6.



Fig. 5: Ovens in house E13.4.



Fig. 6: Backscattered electron images of a barley grain (*Hordeum vulgare*) from a charred deposit (context 4106) in house E13.3-N (image: Caroline Cartwright/Philippa Ryan).

liar from Egypt, but with some of the same fabrics used to make Nubian cooking vessels (Spataro *et al*, forthcoming). In addition, examples of hand-made versions of Egyptian forms, typically wheel-thrown, have been identified. Amara West, unsurprisingly, formed part of a wider trading network: in addition to marl vessels from Egypt and Canaanite amphorae, and fine examples of LHIIIIB Mycenaean stirrup-jars (fig. 9) have been recovered.

The preservation of two cemeteries at Amara West, on the desert escarpment north of the town,

greatly increases the potential of the site for providing insights into ancient life in Egyptian Kush (Binder 2011; Binder *et al.* 2011). The upper cemetery (D) on the escarpment north of the town features elite burials in rock-cut chambers set beneath brick chapels, with small pyramids against the western side of the chapel. One chamber (G301) featured a male and female placed within wooden coffins, accompanied by an assemblage of shallow plates, beer jars and a wine amphora bearing a hieratic label 'year 10, wine of 3 days (fermentation) of the vineyard of Hormes' (translation Robert Demarée). In the chamber beneath another such chapel (G309; fig. 10), a finely painted mask was discovered above the remains of the coffin (Colour-fig. 7), rare evidence for such funerary iconography in late New Kingdom Nubia. In 2012, the discovery of a tumulus grave (G308) dating to the end of the Early Kerma period indicates that the elite New Kingdom burials were situated in a cemetery with a much longer history. In a lower cemetery (C) set on an alluvial terrace overlooking a wadi northeast of the settlement, chambers cut into silt were found filled with disturbed remains of dozens of skeletons, reflecting successive, long-term use of the chambers for burials.

Both cemeteries remained in use for several centuries after the end of the New Kingdom, with the appearance of tumulus superstructures, simple niche



Fig. 7: Ancestor bust (F4182) found in rear room of house E13.3-S.



Fig. 8: Nubian cooking vessel (C2017) found in villa E12.10.

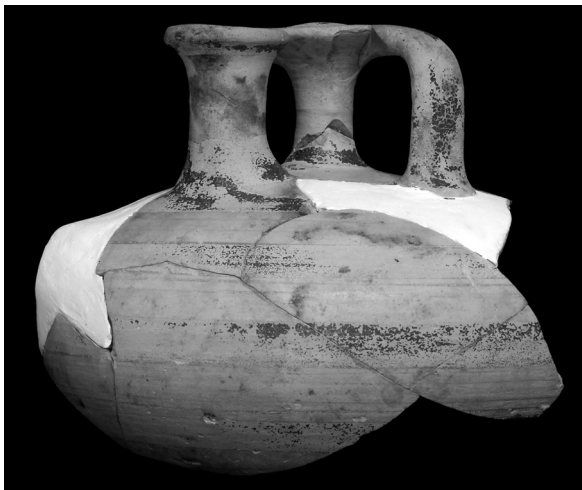


Fig. 9: Mycenaean stirrup jar (C3206) found in room D13.4.2.

burials but also tombs with vaulted mudbrick sub-structures. In Cemetery C, a new type of grave was introduced, with vertical shafts leading to rectangular niches containing between one and five individuals. The artefact assemblages in both New Kingdom and post-New Kingdom tombs reflect a community that experienced and deployed both Egyptian and Nubian cultural affiliation, as evidenced through funerary architecture (pyramids, tumuli), burial rites (extended, contracted burials) and associated grave goods (coffins, burial beds). Preliminary analyses of the 170 skeletons recovered to date suggest about half of the adults died between the ages of 21 and 35, and that the population was of low average stature (males 167cm, females 154cm), perhaps suggesting unfavourable living conditions. Healed fractures are also very common, particularly the rib cage, spine and pelvis. Stable carbon isotope values in tooth enamel allow for an insight into consumption of different types of plants and will be analysed at Durham University (UK) to further explore dietary habits. Strontium isotope analyses, conducted with the University of Purdue, might shed light on migration patterns.

In contrast to the cemetery, the nature of post-New Kingdom occupation of the town site is far from clear. Ceramics of Napatan dynasty date, including marl clay wares imported from Egypt, were identified in surface survey across the south part of the town mound, but architecture of the early first millennium BC has yet to be identified. The general assumption has been that Amara West was abandoned with the collapse of Egyptian control of the region, other than 'squatter' occupation (Spencer, P. 1997: 220–1). But why would a change of political authority prompt inhabitants to move away from a viable settlement? At Buhen, there is clear evidence for occupation continuing throughout the Second Intermediate Period, after Egyptian control of the region had ceased, with the ruler of Kush recognised as authority (Save-Söderbergh 1949).

Another reason for the abandonment of the town can be proposed. The ancient town was located on an island adjacent to the north bank of the river, which flows west to east here. The northern channel is now dry (fig. 11), though its course is clearly visible on satellite imagery, and on the magnetometry survey data (fig. 1); the town was built with gateway and temple facing this secondary channel. Sondages in this palaeochannel have revealed a clear stratigraphy of seven silt layers, representing flood events, interleaved with thick deposits of aeolian sand. Optically Stimulated Luminescence dating of the sand deposits provides a chronological framework for the flood



Fig. 10: Remains of Ramesside tomb chapel and pyramid base (G309).

units (Spencer *et al.* 2012). It seems that by c. 1270 BC,<sup>2</sup> the channel flow was no longer perennial. The effects of this channel drying are considerable: the vegetation barrier (tamarisk trees) along the river banks would no longer be sustained, and without the watercourse, the island and town would no longer be protected from the Saharan sand blown in from the north. Later architectural phases in the town, with doorways blocked and staircases built down into houses that were becoming engulfed in sand, may well reflect inhabitants' attempts to mitigate the deteriorating conditions. Eventually, the island merged with the northern riverbank and the present-day arid conditions prevailed, in stark contrast to fertile islands in the area. Throughout the later first millennium BC, into Meroitic, Medieval and modern times, settlement remained restricted to the south bank (e.g. Abri) and the islands still protected by watercourses and the vegetation barrier.

<sup>2</sup> Error range encompasses 1485-1055 BC. The research on the dynamics of the Holocene Nile at Amara West is also supported through a grant from the Australian Research Council to Mark Macklin and Jamie Woodward (ARC DP0878058). The OSL analyses was carried out by Dr Jean-Luc Schwenninger in the Luminescence Dating Laboratory at the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, University of Oxford

Further information can be found at [www.britishmuseum.org/AmaraWest](http://www.britishmuseum.org/AmaraWest). Fieldwork at Amara West is undertaken with the permission of the National Corporation of Antiquities & Museums (Sudan), with the generous support of The Leverhulme Trust, The Michela Schiff-Giorgini Foundation and the British Academy.

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Fig. 11: View south from desert escarpment across palaeochannel to town site.

#### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Seit 2008 unternimmt das British Museum Untersuchungen des Stadtareals und der Friedhöfe von Amara West, einer ägyptischen Stadt der 19. und 20. Dynastie in Obernubien. Durch eine magnetometrische Untersuchung sind mehrere sehr große Häuser bekannt, eine dieser Villen wurde auch ausgegraben. Hier ist eine klare Differenzierung in der Raumnutzung zu erkennen. Dies betrifft insbesondere einige Räume, die für die Bevorratung und Nahrungsmittelproduktion dienten. Deutlich sind auch Veränderungen im Layout der Stadt anhand des archäologischen Befundes zu bemerken. Das klare Straßennetz mit großen Hauseinheiten und ansehnlichen Magazinbauten wird – wohl wegen zunehmender Bevölkerungsdichte – durch immer

kleinere Häuser mit schmalen Gassen und kleinen Magazinen verändert.

Amara ist den Hausformen nach eine ägyptische Stadt, die Einwohner stehen aber in engem Kontakt zu der nubischen Bevölkerung. Dies ist an Funden von nubischer Keramik sowie an einem Haus mit spezifisch nubischem Layout zu erkennen.

Im Friedhofsbereich sind die Funde einer bemalten Maske, Sargfragmenten und einer Weinamphore mit hieratischer Aufschrift hervorzuheben. Beide Friedhöfe sind nach dem Ende des Neuen Reiches weiter belegt worden, für die Stadt fehlen bisher Belege dafür. Möglicherweise ist durch die Veränderung eines Nilarmes die Umgebung ausgetrocknet, die somit fehlende Vegetation kann die Siedlung nicht mehr vor der in dieser Region starken Sandakkumulation schützen.