

The possible existence of Third Intermediate Period elite tombs at el-Ashmunein

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In 1982, the excavations by the British Museum in the temple of Thoth at el-Ashmunein revealed building remains consisting of the lower courses of a wall and one side of a door, with an adjacent area of limestone paving.¹ The angle of the wall at the side of the door was carved with a torus-roll, which suggests that this was once the exterior corner of a building. In the photograph published here (Fig. 1), this wall appears on the left, with the paved area on the right; part of the pavement has been robbed out to reveal a stone box below. These features, all highlighted in yellow on the plan in Figure 2, lay immediately west of a cluster of later building elements at a higher level, probably dating from the fourth century AD and consisting of a mixture of re-used pharaonic masonry and Roman fired bricks. It appeared that the older building remains at the west had originally extended further towards the east but had been cut away and replaced by the late Roman construction. At the time of excavation, the portion of wall with the door jamb was identified as New Kingdom temple masonry and the pavement next to it as belonging to a later period. The precise date of the pavement was not established; although a tentative attribution to the second century AD was given, the description written at the time stated only: 'The date of the low-level pavement and its associated features is not entirely clear, but it is obviously post-New Kingdom and yet must be earlier than the constructions of the fourth century AD which lie in the east part of [excavation square] B1 and continue into B3'.² Further consideration of this wall and pavement now suggests an alternative option, that they are both post-New Kingdom but still date from a time well within the pharaonic period. The wall, it was previously suggested, might have been part of the Ramesside temple or have belonged to a chapel of the Third Intermediate Period built in the Ramesside courtyard.³ The latter opinion was influenced by the discovery in the area of the stela of King Osorkon III and other blocks bearing his name.⁴

A reconsideration of the design and location of the remains in B1 permits an alternative interpretation of them as part of a tomb. The situation of the building places it on the east side of the axis of the temple and in front of the pylon of Horemheb, identified by the British Museum expedition.⁵ This position conforms well with that adopted for elite tombs from the Third Intermediate Period and later,⁶ as illustrated most famously by the royal tombs of the Twenty-first and Twenty-second Dynasties at Tanis, and the royal necropolis of Sais described by Herodotus. Other examples of elite tombs at the front of major temples

¹ Spencer, *Excavations at El-Ashmunein* II, 31, pl. 31.

² Spencer, *Excavations at El-Ashmunein* II, 31.

³ Spencer, *Excavations at El-Ashmunein* II, 70.

⁴ Spencer, *Excavations at El-Ashmunein* II, 32, 70.

⁵ Spencer, *Excavations at El-Ashmunein* II, 15ff.

⁶ See the collected examples in Stadelmann, *MDAIK* 27 (1971), 111–23.

include that of Harsiese at Medinet Habu, the God's Wives of Amun at the same temple, and the tombs at the front of the temple of Amun at Tell el-Balamun.⁷ The possibility of the buildings at el-Ashmunein having been tombs is supported by the architectural details of the structures, which show features very similar to certain of the tombs at Tanis in the character of the masonry. The re-used blocks of the pavement have been cut to modest sizes, are built together rather carelessly, and exhibit a kind of bevelled trimming along the corners - all features which appear in the Tanis tombs.⁸ Set into the floor of the pavement at Ashmunein was a limestone box, cut from a single block, and measuring 49.3 x 50.3cm, with an internal depth of 47cm.⁹ This box resembles a Canopic container and its position sunk into the floor would agree with such a purpose.

Owing to the destruction of the building to a low level, hardly any decoration had survived on the small remaining stretches of wall. However, on the exterior of the jamb of the door was a carved foot of a figure in sunk relief, facing inwards. In the vicinity of the structure were numerous blocks with remains of reliefs and inscriptions, among which were several dating from the Twenty-third Dynasty. The torus-roll on the corner of the wall to the right of the door suggests that this was the end of one building, so the pavement might have belonged to the next one in a row, rather similar to the manner in which the chapels of the God's Wives of Amun at Medinet Habu are ranged in a row.

The existence of a row of tomb-chapels in the forecourt of the temple of Thoth at Ashmunein would not be surprising, since there would have been no shortage of suitably high-status candidates who might have been buried within the temple in the Third Intermediate Period. In addition to the local rulers of the city, such as Nimlot and Thotemhat, there were also the High Priests of Thoth, who could at this period have chosen the fashion for burial in the temple instead of a desert tomb at Tuna el-Gebel. Unfortunately the destruction of the temple remains at Ashmunein, where the pharaonic masonry has been thoroughly quarried for lime or re-used in later buildings, precludes the chance of finding a definitive answer. If the structures are indeed the remains of tomb-chapels, then any associated burial chambers would lie deep below the subsoil water-table.

Bibliography

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⁷ Spencer, *Excavations at Tell el-Balamun, 1999-2001*, 20ff.

⁸ See the photographs in Brissaud, *Cahiers de Tanis I*, 40-41, pls. IV.a-b, V.b.

⁹ Spencer, *Excavations at El-Ashmunein II*, 31, pls. 31, 32, 34b.



Fig. 1: The architectural remains as found at el-Ashmunein. The floor with the Canopic box is on the right of the wall with the door-jamb, belonging to an adjoining structure.

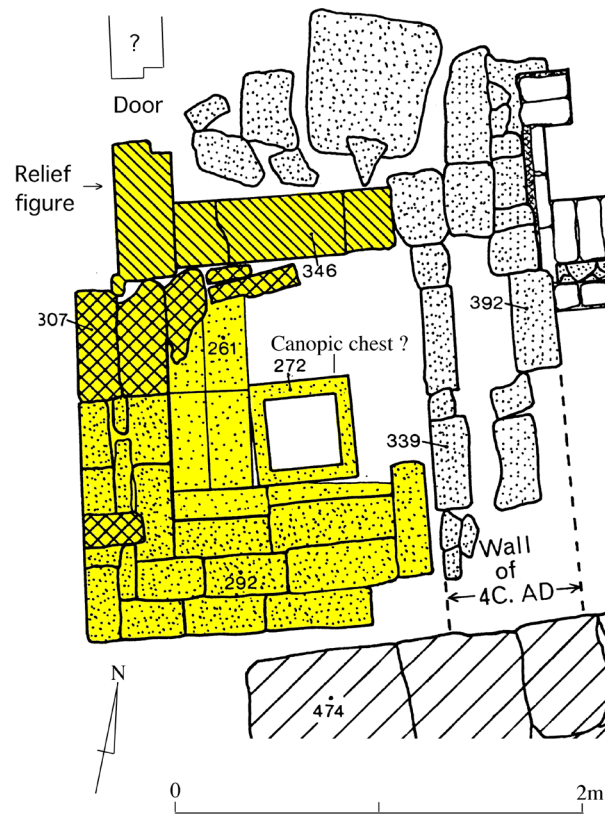


Fig. 2: Plan of the remains of the floor and wall of the possible tomb-chapel (in yellow), with the Canopic box as found.