



el-Qurna

EXPLORING LUXOR'S 3,500-YEAR-OLD CEMETERY

THAT WAS ALSO HOME TO THE LIVING

For three millennia, the vast cemetery of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna at Thebes has been the focal point of continuous human activity. **Garry Shaw** tells CWA about a project that, with the help of the local population, is set to reveal both its ancient and its recent history.

Sheikh Abd el-Qurna on the west bank of the Nile at Luxor is a huge necropolis that dates back at least three millennia, perhaps further, to the earliest burials of the ancient elite of Thebes. It was also home to the living, as attested by the recently demolished jumble of hamlets that were once strewn atop the tombs.

Now the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) is working to understand both the ancient and the modern history of el-Qurna, a project that involves the local community and, as a result, is creating much-needed employment in the area following the collapse of the tourism industry. Since October 2012, the Qurna Site Improvement (QSI) project, managed by ARCE, is recording the

remains of the hamlets that once stood on the Theban foothills.

The major impetus behind this fieldwork is the manual clearance of debris left over from the demolition of the hamlets of el-Qurna and el-Khokha, which were built across and on top of the site's ancient tombs; both hamlets were destroyed as part of a countrywide policy of removing modern buildings from archaeological sites between 2007 and 2010. Though now largely lost, these mud-brick houses are as much a part of the site's history as the ancient burials, especially as their architecture had, over time, become inextricably fused with the tombs.

Thus, understanding this modern history is a priority for the ARCE team: while removing the rubble by hand, to make the site safer and less chaotic, they

are recording the hamlets' remains and collecting ethnographic data about their inhabitants, ensuring that Qurnawi culture and customs – both rapidly vanishing – are preserved for posterity.

Theban necropolis

The QSI project is the latest in a long line of archaeological explorations at Luxor, though it is one of the few to treat the recent history of el-Qurna with as much interest as its ancient past. The earliest narrative of a European visiting Luxor is that of 'the Unknown Venetian', whose account was written in 1589. In it, he mentions the aggressive nature of the west bank's population, and how ship captains preferred to avoid them by disembarking on the Nile's east bank. This belligerent behaviour is also mentioned by later travellers, and was



ABOVE On the ancient necropolis, some of the former homes at el-Qurna.

LEFT Aerial view of the necropolis in 2008.

Surprisingly, however, so was preparing for it. The greatest shock was that a site as famous as the Theban necropolis – and a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979 – had never been properly surveyed. ▶

today. As time passed, the hamlets grew, each developing a unique identity and their own local traditions.

With a concession covering an area roughly 1km² in size, divided into 29 sections (each prefixed by the letter ‘Q’), fieldwork at el-Qurna always promised to be a massive undertaking.



perhaps a result of the local people guarding their wealth: the plentiful and lucrative supply of mummies from the necropolis, which they sold on to traders as powdered *mumiya* for use in medicines. At this time, it appears that there was no permanent settlement either at el-Qurna or the neighbouring hamlet at el-Khokha; instead, the local population occupied the Theban tombs for just part of the year – and when seeking refuge from Ottoman attacks.

This all changed in the late 18th century, when Thebes came to the attention of a European scientific community eager to acquire antiquities for their studies and museums. It is thought that the Greek 19th-century explorer, Giovanni d’Athanasia (called ‘Yanni’) built the first free-standing house at el-Qurna, and that his presence inspired locals to settle permanently above the ancient tombs. In Athanasia’s wake, foreigners – explorers, archaeologists, treasure-hunters, and tourists – would become a constant presence on the Theban foothills, from ‘The Great Belzoni’ and Howard Carter, through to the ARCE team working there

THE QURNA SITE IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

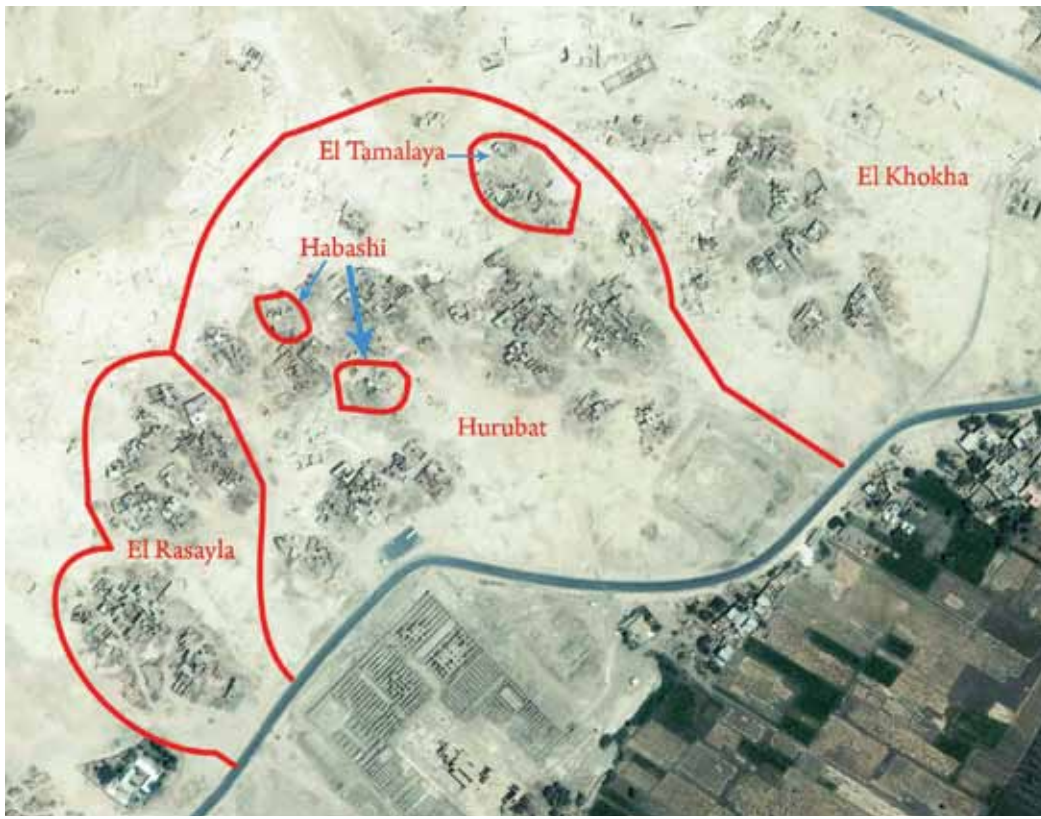
With the January 2011 revolution, and the removal from office of President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, Egypt’s tourist industry – one of its main sources of income – collapsed, a situation made worse by fluctuating travel warnings that are only now being relaxed. Indeed, since mid-2013, Egypt’s visitor numbers have dropped by 45%, costing the country an estimated US\$1 billion (£600m) in lost revenue each month. Nowhere in Egypt, however, has suffered as greatly as the southern city of Luxor, home to some of the world’s greatest ancient monuments – including the Temple of Amun at Karnak and the Valley of the Kings. Traditionally a major tourist draw, for the past few years Luxor’s archaeological sites have lain empty, its city streets quiet. With an estimated 70% of Luxor locals making their living from the tourist trade, either directly or indirectly, many have been struggling to make ends meet.

Thanks to a grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), about 1,000 local people are now working on ARCE projects at Luxor; with 600 men employed at el-Qurna alone. For a population suffering from mass unemployment, this has been an important economic boost, especially as each man employed represents a different household. At the same time, the ARCE team (directed in the field by Dr Andrew Bednarski) has been inviting locals to share their knowledge of the area, thus helping the team to better understand the recent history and archaeology of the hamlets. ARCE’s broad job-creation programme also provides training in archaeology and conservation to inspectors from Egypt’s Ministry of Antiquities (MSA).



BELOW The hamlet of el-Qurna as it used to be, nestling within the necropolis.

PHOTO: Su Bayfield



ABOVE A map showing the location of the different family groups who lived in the area of el-Qurna, and neighbouring el-Khokha.

Into the field

When ARCE field director Dr Andrew Bednarski began developing the QSI project, he realised that there was no accurate modern map that covered the whole area. There was only one solution: to produce a new map, one that not only accurately recorded the topographic and historical features, but which would also reflect different interpretations of the landscape. The ARCE team consulted the local people, and discovered that though Egyptologists had traditionally divided the hamlets of the Theban foothills

BELOW This house, which belonged to a man called Hanafy Abd el-Taher, shows how the homes on the necropolis were adapted to the needs of his family but also incorporated into the existing landscape.

between el-Qurna and el-Khokha, the Qurnawis themselves actually split them according to kinship.

Thus, plotting these divisions onto a map, the team revealed not two but four major sectors: el-Rasayla, Habashi, el-Tamalaya, and Hurubat, each associated with a separate family. Of these, the Abd el-Rasouls were the owners of houses at el-Rasayla, for example, while the families of Hurubat all believed themselves to be descended from a founding father named Harb. Such findings – which provide fascinating cultural details that would surely otherwise have been forgotten within a couple of generations – highlight the importance of community involvement and local knowledge to any archaeological project.

One of the most fascinating aspects for the ARCE team when clearing the site is what is being revealed about everyday

life at el-Qurna. Especially interesting are the ways in which the Qurnawis adapted their houses to take into account the landscape and the ancient tombs. Many houses across el-Qurna and el-Khokha incorporated the rock-cut tombs into their structures, often being built within the walled forecourts that mark the entrance to the ancient burial chambers.

A good example of this is Q08 Structure 1, the former home of a man called Hanafy Abd el-Taher and his family, and one of the houses recently cleared on the necropolis. Here, the ancient forecourt was divided up into pens for animals, while the bedrock had been modified to create an upper floor. The ancient tomb associated with the house was accessible from the ground floor, and part of it was used as the household toilet – a common practice at el-Qurna. Such an arrangement was also seen at one of the site's largest buildings: the Snake Motel. The motel, in section Q05, had been built within the tomb forecourt of a man called Hunefer, an official who lived during Egypt's Ramesside Period (1298-1069 BC).

The team also found that some houses at el-Qurna had been illegally expanded, despite official bans on such activities and government monitoring to halt these practices. Evidence of one method of avoiding the watchful eyes of the authorities was seen in Q11, at the house of Abd el-Baset: an animal pen was built, and was used until its presence had become accepted by all; then, during the night, it was rebuilt using stronger materials. The pen could then be used as an additional room for the household.





LEFT One of the largest buildings at el-Qurna was accommodation rather alarmingly called 'Snake Motel'. **INSET** Burial chambers were often used as bathrooms, like that seen here in section Q05.



access to the ancient monuments for visitors. The project's long-term impact on archaeology will also be considerable, as Dr Bednarski explains: 'This is the first comprehensive study of a rural Upper Egyptian modern settlement, including an entire ceramics corpus and evidence for building techniques. Rural life in Egypt is changing at a rapid pace, so it is important to record this information, which is quickly disappearing throughout the country.'

Archaeology has long provided a means of support for the people of el-Qurna. Although their relationship with this archaeology has now changed, the Qurnawis' lives, like that of the houses in which they once lived, remain entangled with the ancient remains. ■

replicating ancient tomb scenes for tourists. Perhaps most intriguingly of all, when working in Q11, the team discovered a collection of magic spells, which they analysed with the help of a local sheikh. One, written for a man named Ahmed Ibn Nawal, compelled people to purchase items from his market stall, while others encouraged conception. Conversely, a spell identified as 'Taskaret Dawod' was designed to render a man impotent, and included a symbol which represented a *djinn* (genie), who drew his power from stars roughly sketched around the page.

Future aims

Though the main goal of the ARCE team was to bring employment to Luxor's west bank of the Nile, when complete the QSI project will leave the ancient necropolis visually less disturbed, and with better

From cooking pots and drinking jars, to *arosa* dolls that were sold to tourists, the remains of the hamlets' material culture are also being revealed to the ARCE team. Clearing a house in section Q05, they found an invitation card from relatives of the Basily family, who lived in the house, inviting them to Cairo to attend a funeral. And, attached to the house of Abd el-Baset in Q11, they found limestone debris, evidence of a limestone-carving industry that saw local artisans

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Garry Shaw would like to thank Dr Andrew Bednarski, field director of the ARCE Qurna Site Improvement (QSI) project, and ARCE, for supplying information and pictures.

For more information on ARCE and QSI, visit <http://arce.org/conservation/Qurna/qurna-overview>

Dr Garry Shaw is author of *The Egyptian Myths: a guide to the ancient gods and legends* (2014).

ALL IMAGES: ARCE, unless otherwise stated

BELOW Modern artefacts found during excavation of the former hamlets reveal touching insights into the everyday life of the inhabitants: an invitation to a funeral in Cairo (**LEFT**), a modern limestone carved relief (**MIDDLE**), and, intriguingly, a magic spell (**RIGHT**).

