

Touring the sands of time

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Sohag governorate is rich in archaeological sites, but seldom visited. **Nevine El-Aref** toured the area with experts concerned with the area's future development, and found herself witnessing an interesting argument

Although my family originally came from Sohag, I have only been there once before -- in 1998, when I spent a week touring the historical landmarks of Sohag and Akhmim. On this, my second visit to the place that has come to hold a special place in my heart, I realised what an agreeable stopover it is -- not only because of its historical interest but also its natural environment. This is just the place to relax in a largely undisturbed rural atmosphere and share the time of day with its friendly residents.

Sohag was heavily populated by an Egyptian-Greek community in the early centuries of the Christian era, when it was an important centre for the production of anthropoid coffins, portrait-mummies and textiles -- even today it is still renowned for the latter.

We spent the night in Luxor and set off from there on our tour. It was a pleasant drive through some of the richest and best-cultivated tracts of land I have ever seen. These were scenes from a way of life which had remained almost unchanged for millennia. The green fields were interspersed with date palms and clusters of donkeys, cows and camels, and several farmers were loading harvested sugar cane onto trucks. The sight of such quantities of sugar cane tied into great bundles whetted our appetites. How nice it would have been to suck the juice -- but this was a professional tour, and there was no time to stop.

The vibrant landscape slipped by: dotted along the canal banks were vividly-garbed peasant women who squatted washing clothes and pots. Others walked along the canal paths, elegantly upright as they balanced *ballas* (large clay water jars) on their heads. The three-hour journey passed quickly.

When we arrived at Akhmim, the city sacred to the god Min in Pharaonic times, we found the area teeming with people, buses, cars, and carts. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry, and since we were on an archaeological mission to monitor work in progress, we, too, were rushed, first to the site of a modern Islamic cemetery which lies on top of what is believed to be a large temple of Ramses II -- indeed, parts of the temple are visible through the covering of sand -- and then to the Sohag museum.



Seti I bends slightly at the waist in a show of reverence to the god Amun

The overall plan for the region is to remove the modern necropolis which infringes on the archaeological site in order to facilitate excavation of the temple. This was no new idea. In fact, there has been an 11-year hiatus since the plan to develop a city in the El-Kawssar area -- at a cost of L36 million -- was first envisioned. Now, we learned, the plan is rolling again, and excavation will run parallel with the relocation. The project is scheduled for completion in 2005.

Yehya El-Masri, director-general of antiquities in Upper Egypt, was our guide round the site and its storeroom. It was the first time I have ever been privileged to enter an antiquities storeroom, and I must say that I was surprised to find it to be such a poor hall, with the artifacts spread all over the place with no semblance of order. One of the objects was a small, partly deteriorated mummy, perhaps of a child. Another was a large limestone stela which simply lay on the floor. But this was no ordinary stela. It was, as El-Masri quickly told us, Upper Egypt's Rosetta Stone. "You could say this is similar to the famous piece which provided the magic key to deciphering hieroglyphics," he said.

His comment aroused our interest, and we found ourselves looking at a well-preserved stela, two metres high and a metre and half wide, bearing a beautifully-inscribed, 2,200 year-old royal decree. The text, El-Masri said, concerned the leap year in the Egyptian calendar. "It is a record that amends the ancient calendar by order of Ptolemy III, who ruled Egypt from 246 to 222 BC and, as you can see, it is inscribed in both hieroglyphic and demotic texts. But here is an empty space. This was where the artisan who carved the inscription intended to write the Greek text, but for some reason he neglected to do so."

The inscription authorised new religious cults and festivals, created new posts in the priesthood, and made note of battles between Egypt and Syria. The upper part was adorned with carvings of Ptolemy and his sister Berenice, as well as deities including Osiris, the hawk-headed Horus, the winged goddess Nephthys, and Sohag's local god Min.

I must say that it was very exciting to see this monument and to realise that the Rosetta Stone is not unique. This stela in what should have been three different scripts was unearthed a year ago inside a ruined temple in the Naga El-Deir area, 450 kms south of Sohag. "It was found shattered, but archaeologists have assembled the fragments and restored the piece," El-Masri said. He added that studies to decipher the decree had not yet been completed.

Our second stop was at the unfinished structure of the local Sohag Museum, which lies in a picturesque location overlooking the Nile on one side and Sohag's main road on the other. Beside it is a public garden and the office of the Egyptian Tourist Administration.

Construction of the museum has been on hold since 1999 for lack of necessary funds. Fortunately, though, after a LE5 million grant by President Mubarak to the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), work on completing the museum and upgrading the area will now go ahead immediately, .

The small museum is on two levels. The first, a subterranean floor, contains a mummy room, library, photographic and restoration laboratories and a small cafeteria. The upper level will be the museum's main exhibition hall, where 5,000 objects collected from archaeological sites in Middle Egypt as well as those currently in storage will be on display.

We had a modest meal at the Sohag governorate, and then headed off for the famous site of Abydos on the west bank of the Nile. This is the city sacred to the god Osiris and is where, according to legend, his head is buried. The ancient Egyptians believed that the horizon west of Abydos was the gateway to the afterlife, and for that reason, and in order to be buried near their legendary ancestor, the ancients considered it an excellent burial place.

We went, of course, to the famous temple of Seti I, which has some of the finest reliefs of any period to be found in the Nile valley. It has seven separate sanctuaries, dedicated to Seti I himself and to Osiris, Isis,

Horus, Amun, Mut and Khonsu. Their entrances are delicately carved in bas-relief, and they still retain their original colour.

This is the temple which contains a Kings' List, a roll of gods and kings engraved in royal *cartouches*. More than 70 Pharaohs preceded Seti I, starting with Mena, founder of the first dynasty. For political reasons the names of the monotheist Pharaoh Akhenaten and Queen Hatshepsut were not included in the list.

As we were looking round, then Supreme Council of Antiquities secretary-general Gaballa Ali Gaballa was telling us some interesting tales about Abydos and its temples, and of the British archaeologist who married an Egyptian and was much respected by the locals, who called her Umm Seti (mother of Seti). She would treat the temple as a sacred place, and would remove her shoes before entering. "She was very devoted to the memory of the Pharaoh Seti, and believed she had lived in his court in a previous life. She devoted her life to studying the reliefs and transcribing the texts of the temple. When she died she was buried beside her divine god-king Seti." He added that local women believed they could enhance their fertility by immersing themselves in the water of what is known as the Osirian, a temple behind the temple of Seti, which floods from time to time.

The sun was low on the western horizon when we took our leave of this unforgettable temple, with promises of another tour to the early 1st and 2nd dynasty tombs on the necropolis of Abydos in the near future. As we drove back to Luxor and watched the timeless landscape rolling by and the families going home with their donkeys cows and water-buffaloes, we thought of all we had seen and of the need to make the remarkable attractions of this region better known.

Seti I bends slightly at the waist in a show of reverence to the god Amun.

Great statue - but who is it?

So, who is it? Princess Merit-Amun, beloved daughter of Pharaoh Ramses II? Or is it another 19th-dynasty princess? Or does it date from the 18th dynasty -- is it, indeed, one of the daughters, or even the wife, of the mysterious Pharaoh Akhenaten?

What began as a discussion about the relocation of a modern Islamic cemetery at Akhmim has ended up as a controversy over the identity of the magnificent statue of a princess -- or a queen -- which was found at the site 21 years ago and now on display in Sohag's outdoor museum.

I was following Gaballa Ali Gaballa, until recently secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), and an SCA delegation as they toured Akhmim (see accompanying story). They were inspecting the archaeological work in progress and discussing the need to relocate the modern cemetery as soon as possible so that work could begin on excavating the temple of Ramses II. I wandered off to look at the site, and by the time I returned the conversation had switched to the statue of Merit-Amun.

I had been present when the statue was cleaned, restored and erected in the Sohag Museum, so it was with great interest that I listened in on the conversation between Gaballa and Yehia El- Masri, director-general of antiquities in Upper Egypt.

It was beautiful, the 11.5m-high statue. But was it, indeed, Ramses' beloved daughter as earlier supposed, or was it someone else from another dynasty altogether? What a fascinating thought! I had the unique opportunity to learn, first-hand, that archaeology is not as simple as it is sometimes made out to be. It is

much more than excavation and discovery; it entails evaluating the finds, analysing details and learning where exactly the object fits into ancient history.

According to Gaballa, the face clearly indicates Amarna-style art. "Merit-Amun has almond-shaped eyes typical of the Amarna period, and her lips are sensual and clearly outlined," he said. "These were artistic trends that can be identified even before the rule of Akhenaten, in the time of his father Amenhotep III.

"Moreover, the belly bulges slightly in this statue, and the skirt is pleated over her thighs in the manner of the Amarna period." But he added, as an afterthought: "It could, of course, be the aftermath of Amarna."

El-Masri did not agree. "We can be absolutely sure that this statue is of Merit-Amun, the daughter of Ramses II, because the cartouche is original. It has been neither erased nor reinscribed, and the titles inscribed on the back of the statue are the same as those in Nefertari's temple of Abu Simbel. There are many scenes in the temple of Ramses II's wife, and these show Nefertari with her daughter Merit-Amun, and the inscriptions confirm this. They say, 'this is my beloved daughter Merit-Amun, the child of Atum, the first sun-god.'"



The similarity in the physiognomy of Merit-Amun with the art of the Amarna period is indisputable, as can be seen when compared with this head of Akhenaten (right)

In support of his hypothesis, El-Masri pointed out that a bust with the same features as the statue found at Akhmim could be seen in a chapel in the Ramasseum of Ramses II on the Theban necropolis. "It has the same face and the same titles," he said.

Gaballa, however, insisted the statue might well have been sculpted during the Amarna period but left without identification, and that the cartouche of Merit-Amun was added later. "During Ramses II's rule, there was free usurping of monuments of earlier periods, and the royal family took credit for a lot of the work carried out by their predecessors," he said. In support of his hypothesis, Gaballa said that 13 inscribed blocks dating from the Amarna period had been unearthed under the base of Merit-Amun's statue.

"There are two reasons why these blocks may have been found at Akhmim," Gaballa added. "One is that the temple of Ramses II might have been built on top of an earlier temple of Akhenaten, who, incidentally, did his best to spread his monotheistic religion all over the land. The other reason could be that Ramses II, wishing to reinstate the cult of Amun, and yet unwilling to destroy the sacred religious texts inscribed on the earlier monument, buried some blocks and reused others in his own temple."

Gaballa pointed out that the face of Merit-Amun somewhat resembled that of the goddess Mut in a bust in Cairo Museum, which dates from the reign of Amenhotep III, so it is possible that this statue is of the same goddess. Unfortunately, because only the face remains, with no clothing or adornments to confirm the style of art, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed. "However," he added, "goddesses usually take the faces of queens and princesses."

El-Masri felt strongly that the blocks found beneath the statue could belong to "an undiscovered chapel of Akhenaten when he was co-regent with his father, Amenhotep III." He went on to explain that the priests of Akhmim "may have allowed him to build a chapel or shrine to the sun-god Aten at the site, for two reasons: First, the priests of Min, Sohag's local god, were not as powerful as those of the god Amun at Karnak; second, Akhenaten's mother and maternal uncle were very powerful in the area, and were undoubtedly able to influence the local priests. I am sure this chapel was built during the co-regency of Amenhotep III and Akhenaten because it is clear from the blocks found beneath the statue of Merit-Amun that they are in the style of Amenhotep III. Moreover, they are carved skilfully in the traditional manner, not in the more realistic style typical of Amarna," El-Masri insisted.

In response to Gaballa's claim that the Akhenaten's blocks could have been transported to Akhmim from elsewhere, El-Masri saw this as unlikely. "The blocks of stone are enormous, and very well inscribed, and I believe they were constructed *in situ*," he said.

"Akhmim's inhabitants were strong supporters of Akhenaten," El-Masri went on, "and, according to Nicolas Grimal's book on ancient Egypt, when he became Pharaoh it was the people of Akhmim who suggested that the new capital, Akhet-Aten, should be further north at what we now know as Tel El-Amarna".

Temple construction during Akhenaten's rule was not confined to his new city. Sun temples were built all over the country: within the sacred confines of Amun's great Karnak temple, where distinctive blocks known as *talatat* have been found in great number; and even as far north as Saqqara, where the tomb of Meri-neith, a high priest of Aten, was found last year.

The artistic style that characterises Amarna art did not start with the Pharaoh Akhenaten, nor did it end with his death. So, what is the truth about the identity of Merit-Amun? I saw strength in both arguments. Perhaps, when the modern cemetery is removed and excavations around Akhmim continue, more temple blocks will come to light and the truth will be revealed.