

# A THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SOUTH BYDOS



## *Egypt's Late Middle Kingdom in Microcosm*

BY JOSEF WEGNER

SOME 3,850 YEARS ago a remarkable experiment in architectural and social engineering took place on the edge of the desert in southern Egypt. The sacred site of Abydos—the burial place of Egypt's first pharaohs and a religious center for the god Osiris—saw the construction of a royal mortuary complex named *Enduring-Are-the-Places-of-Khakaure-True-of-Voice-in-Abydos* (in Egyptian: *Wah-Sut-Khakaure-maa-kheru-em-Abdju*). Dedicated to pharaoh Khakaure-Senwosret III—the fifth pharaoh of Egypt's 12th Dynasty (ca. 1878–1841 BCE)—this complex was erected on virgin land to the south of the traditional center of Abydos, an area now called “South Abydos.”

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Pharaoh Khakaure-Senwosret III of the 12th Dynasty (Courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum).



Osiris-Khentiamtiu, Lord of Abydos, sitting on his throne (scene in temple of Seti I at Abydos).

## ABYDOS AND THE CULT OF OSIRIS

**A**ncient Abydos (*Abdju*) played a lengthy and important role in the development of Egyptian civilization. Located 500 km south of Cairo, it sits on the desert's edge, 15 km west of the Nile. During the Predynastic period (before *ca.* 3000 BCE) Abydos served as the cemetery site for a series of regional rulers whose capital, Thinis, was located nearby on the banks of the Nile. This early cemetery, known today as Umm el-Gaab (“mother of pots” in Arabic), was the kernel from which the subsequent importance of Abydos grew. In the Early Dynastic Period (*ca.* 3000–2700 BCE) the pharaohs of Egypt’s 1st Dynasty and two from its 2nd Dynasty built their tombs there. This royal necropolis was protected by a canine god named Khentiamentiu (“*Foremost-of-the-westerners*”), and though the temple dedicated to him is now largely destroyed, we do know its site, Kom es-Sultan.

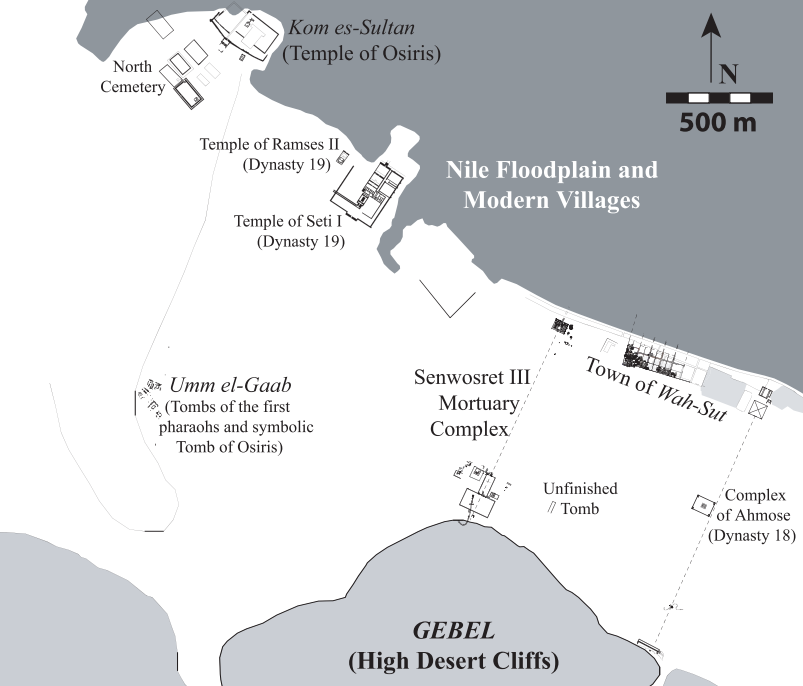
The political importance of Thinis and Abydos diminished after Memphis (Egypt’s new capital just south of modern Cairo) was founded around 3000 BCE. With subsequent pharaohs being buried primarily in the Memphite necropolis, the significance of Abydos became understood increasingly in religious terms. By the end of the Old Kingdom (*ca.* 2200 BCE), Abydos had emerged as a primary cult center for Osiris, the god of the dead (on previous page). This deity, representing the incarnation of the deceased and reborn pharaoh as ruler of the netherworld, was now thought to have been buried at Umm el-Gaab. Joining this identity to that of the ancient canine god, Osiris-Khentiamentiu was now known as “Lord of Abydos.”

Veneration of Osiris continued to develop at Abydos during the First Intermediate Period (*ca.* 2200–2050 BCE) and the Middle Kingdom (*ca.* 2050–1700 BCE). Annual religious processions from Umm el-Gaab to the presumed burial place of Osiris expressed the belief that Osiris was buried at Abydos. Both the pharaohs and their subjects took increasing interest in the cult of Osiris. Royal cult buildings were erected in and around the main temple dedicated to Osiris in the Kom es-Sultan, while private chapels and tombs were built in the cemetery fields that extend west into the desert toward Umm el-Gaab.

Although the history of Abydos continued long after the end of the Middle Kingdom—indeed, the best-known monument from Abydos is the beautifully preserved 19th Dynasty temple built by Seti I (*ca.* 1294–1279 BCE)—the Middle Kingdom witnessed the classical development and florescence of the cult of Osiris. And during this period Senwosret III constructed his mortuary complex and tomb at South Abydos, expressing his intense personal devotion to Osiris-Khentiamentiu, Lord of Abydos.



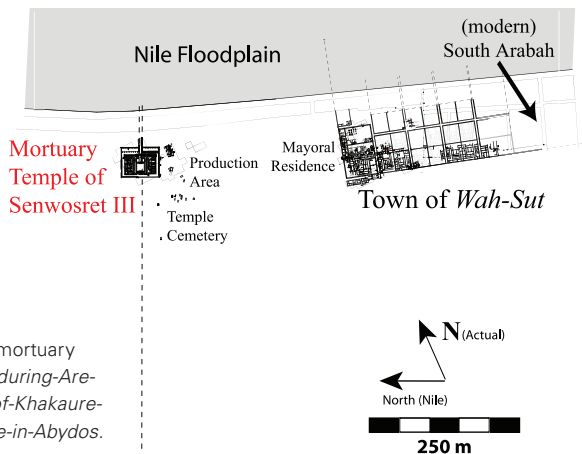
Map of Egypt showing all the sites mentioned in this issue.



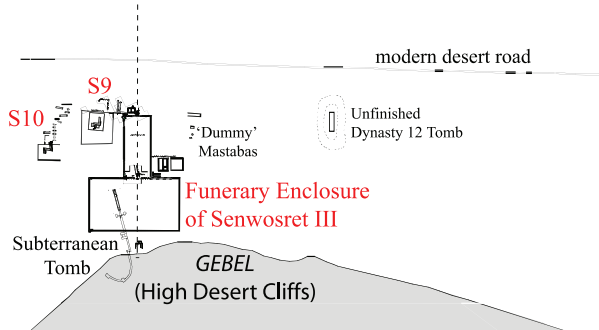
Map of Greater Abydos showing the location of the mortuary complex of Senwosret III.

This mortuary complex is an example of Middle Kingdom state-planning at its finest. Designed as a comprehensive, semi-autonomous center for the cult of the deceased pharaoh, it also functioned as an ancient Egyptian suburban development.

The site's blueprint is ambitious. As currently known, the complex covers approximately 1 km<sup>2</sup> between the edge of the Nile floodplain and the high desert cliffs. Its conceptual focus is the subterranean royal tomb of Senwosret III, located at the base of the cliffs inside a T-shaped, brick enclosure. To the north, on the edge of the desert escarpment and overlooking the floodplain, sits the mortuary temple, *Beautiful-is-the-Ka* (*Nefer-Ka*). To the east of the temple lies the planned town that



Plan of the mortuary complex *Enduring-Are-the-Places-of-Khakaure-True-of-Voice-in-Abydos*.



Josef Wegner

## BEAUTIFUL-IS-THE-KA

Extensively excavated since 1994, the mortuary temple of Senwosret III housed a limestone cult building at its core. Its central ceremonial gateway was decorated with flagpoles and approached by a causeway coming up from the floodplain below. The interior of the building was composed of three distinct blocks. The East Block was a storage area used to manage the cult's offerings and produce. Its West Block contained three house-like units that probably functioned as living quarters and offices by the temple's rotating priests and administrators. The core of the temple was its stone cult building. Unfortunately, only foundations and fragments of its architecture and reliefs survive to allow a reconstruction of its original appearance.



Reconstruction of the mortuary temple's forecourt and interior hypostyle hall.

The cult building stood on a low raised platform fronted by a pillared forecourt. Two quartzite statues of the pharaoh, each one and a half times life-size, flanked its doorway. The interior hypostyle hall contained papyrus-bundle columns and a tripartite sanctuary area with a central shrine for offerings. A series of life-size calcite (Egyptian alabaster) figures of the pharaoh also stood inside. Numerous fragments of relief indicate the cult building was brightly colored both inside and out with carved scenes and inscriptions relating to the afterlife veneration of Senwosret III and his association with Osiris-Khentiamentiu, Lord of Abydos.

## MIDDLE KINGDOM ARCHAEOLOGY

Although Egyptologists often identify the Middle Kingdom (*ca.* 2050–1700 BCE) as ancient Egypt’s “classical age” (Dynasties 11, 12, and 13), the archaeology of this period has traditionally been less prominent in the public eye than that of Egypt’s Old or New Kingdoms. Most of the monuments erected during this period were obscured or destroyed by subsequent New Kingdom (*ca.* 1550–1050 BCE) and later construction. Only vestiges of the tremendous monuments erected across Egypt by Middle Kingdom rulers now remain. For example, the famed Egyptian Labyrinth—the pyramid temple of Amenemhat III at Hawara—which was once described by the Greek historian Herodotus, has now all but vanished. And even the capital of Egypt’s Middle Kingdom pharaohs—a city named *Seizer-of-the-Two-Lands* (*Itjet-Tawy*)—remains undiscovered and therefore unstudied by archaeologists.

housed the administrators and workers responsible for maintaining Senwosret III’s afterlife cult. Recent work has shown that during most of its history the town was called *Wah-Sut*, an abbreviation of the name of the mortuary complex.


The scribes and architects who designed the mortuary complex and the town tried to predict virtually every aspect of religious, social, and economic life necessary to maintain Senwosret III’s cult for eternity. Despite this, the temple and town lasted for only 150 years during the late 12th and 13th Dynasties (*ca.* 1850–1700 BCE), providing an unparalleled archaeological window into the culture and society of Egypt’s late Middle Kingdom.

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AT SOUTH ABYDOS

Some of the main elements of Senwosret III’s mortuary complex were first discovered and investigated between 1899 and 1903. Kei Yamamoto’s article in this issue discusses this exciting period of archaeological exploration at South Abydos. One of these early explorers, as Jennifer Houser Wegner explains, would later become the first full-time professional curator of the Penn Museum’s Egyptian Section. This early archaeological research provides the foundation for the Museum’s renewed archaeological work at South Abydos. Initiated in 1994, it is generating fresh evidence and deepening our understanding of this remarkable site.

Among the discoveries presented here will be my report of the re-investigation of Senwosret III’s hidden subterranean tomb, located beneath what we now know is the *Mountain-of-Anubis*. Dawn McCormack will then consider two tombs built

adjacent to Senwosret III’s temple enclosure, while Vanessa Smith will examine the recent discovery of the temple’s bakery and brewery complex (*Per-Shena-Senwosret*, or “production facility of Senwosret”).

I will then introduce the work taking place in the town of *Wah-Sut* since we discovered it in 1994, paying particular attention to the palatial residence of the mayors, the recovery of Egypt’s first-known example of a magical birth brick, as well as the first archaeologically identified administrative gatehouse (*areryt*). Nicholas Picardo will discuss the other elite residences in the town, while Stine Rossel will present the ongoing investigation of patterns of animal use as determined from an analysis of the animal bones found in both the temple and town. 

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#### Acknowledgments

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