

Egypt's Well-to-Do

Elite Mansions in the Town of Wah-Sut

BY NICHOLAS S. PICARDO

ARCHAEOLOGISTS STUDY SETTLEMENTS and households to understand how ancient people organized themselves and how social relationships played out through daily routine. We are applying this manner of investigation to the southwest sector of *Wah-Sut* where excavations have exposed a series of elite mansions—residences that collectively formed the town's business district for high-ranking officials. The pharaoh's town planners provided these civil servants with large houses on prime real estate. Located along the settlement's southern wall, this district was closest to the desert

edge, farthest from the potential floodwaters of the Nile and next to the architecturally impressive Mayor's House.

While state-built houses for lower-ranking citizens at other sites typically averaged 3 to 9 rooms, at least 11 mansions in *Wah-Sut* had about 30 rooms and corridors (occupying an area of 27.5 x 31.5 m each). Charles T. Currelly partially excavated three of these—Buildings I, K, and M—in 1902–1903, but they are now mostly covered by the modern town of South Arabah. Currelly's plans and our work suggest that blocks of 4 houses were the general rule, arguing for up to 24 original mansions in *Wah-Sut*.



Building E and small portions of neighboring houses were exposed in 2004.

The proportions and regularity of this neighborhood are reminiscent of another state-sponsored settlement. Located 350 km north of Abydos, the pyramid town of Lahun—established by Senwosret II (the father of Senwosret III)—also includes houses of similar design situated in well-defined rows and blocks on a regular street pattern. Excavated primarily in 1889–90, Lahun is considered the exemplar of Middle Kingdom urbanism. Much of that town was occupied by smaller houses, and though we have yet to define similar non-elite structures in *Wah-Sut*, smaller dwellings probably far outnumbered elite homes there as well. We hope to focus future work to the north of the known mansions to investigate non-elite neighborhoods and to obtain a thorough understanding of all segments of *Wah-Sut's* population during the Middle Kingdom.

ELITE ARCHITECTURE AND ITS AMENITIES

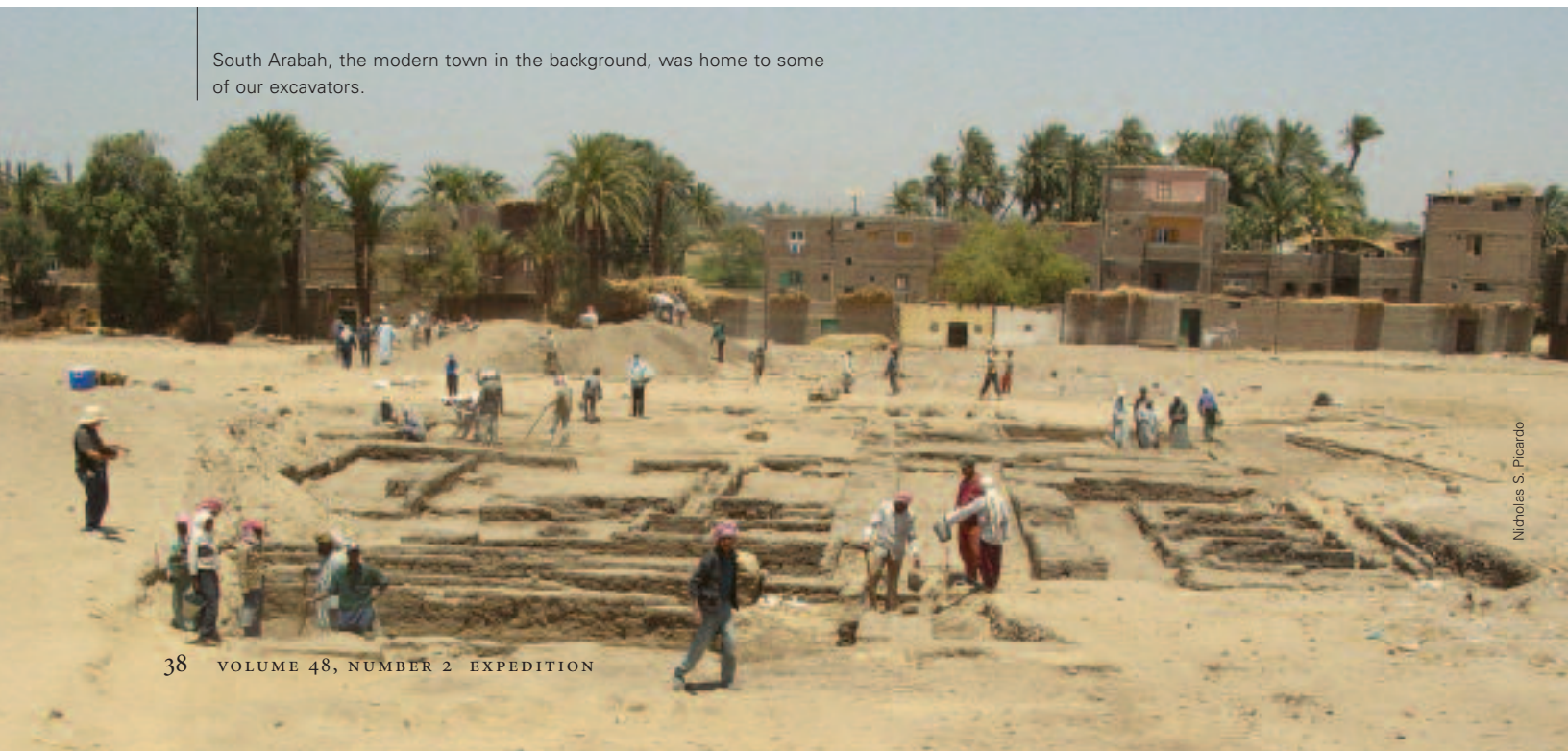
To further our understanding of the inner workings of elite households, in 2004 we excavated one of *Wah-Sut's* best-preserved mansions, Building E. The heart of the house was a residential complex of seven rooms with extensively plastered walls and floors. Its northern component formed a tripartite arrangement of rectangular rooms frequently seen in Middle Kingdom domestic buildings. At its center, a large room served as both living room and reception hall. Two columns supported a high ceiling, and the room's tall walls (higher than

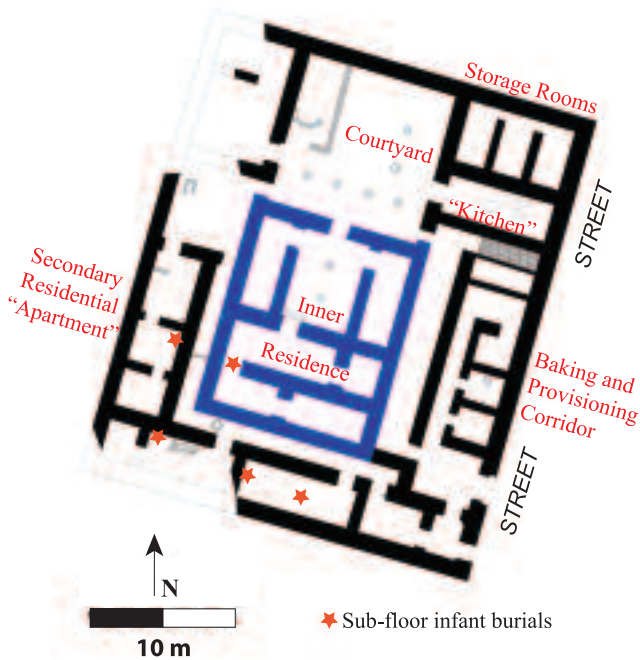
surrounding rooms) would have had windows to allow ventilation and to admit natural light. Adjacent chambers were narrow, less public spaces, with one probably serving as a bedroom. A doorway led back to private family chambers where several fragments of animal figurines and small family statuettes were found, possible vestiges of household religious practices. The retrieval of copper-based needles and grinding stones also indicates utilitarian pursuits.

While more modest houses of the Middle Kingdom also exhibit the tripartite pattern found in Building E, the high status of this dwelling was evident from its many ancillary rooms around the building's perimeter, forming discrete functional zones that accommodated the day-to-day needs of a large household. This house was not only a home but also an office for a high-ranking official. A grand hallway (*ca.* 2 m wide) led visitors from its southeast entrances to a large brick-paved courtyard (10.5 x 10.5 m) north of the inner residence. Bustling traffic in the past left a noticeable depression down the middle of this corridor. At the south end of the courtyard a four-pillared portico formed a veranda for social gatherings and a receiving area for business. Ancient sources indicate that such yards were multipurpose spaces. Archaeological evidence for differentiated tasks is often indicated by bins, pens, animal hitchings, and sunken pot emplacements for either liquids or decorative planting.

Baking and cooking concentrated on Building E's east side, where smoke and fumes could vent easily through windows—

South Arabah, the modern town in the background, was home to some of our excavators.





This plan of Building E shows several functional zones. Columns are reconstructed based on floor depressions and parallels from a neighboring house.

attested by limestone window grate fragments—to the adjacent street. This need for ventilation seems to have influenced the overall orientation of the neighborhood. The internal arrangements of abutting houses mirrored each other, allowing certain types of rooms to always face a street. Along the street side of Building E were three small (ca. 2 x 2.5 m) central chambers that formed a provisioning corridor where considerable pottery and evidence of burning in two rooms suggest the production and/or storage of bread. The innermost of these chambers may have been used for food preparation and temporary quarters for household staff.

Additional food processing and other activities probably took place on Building E's roof—a practice still observed in modern Egyptian villages. Likely hints of a stairway to the roof were found just north of the provisioning corridor. A more formal "kitchen" adjacent to the courtyard was also equipped with a circular cooking pit and two brick ovens in its floor. A convenient pantry of three identical storage chambers was located nearby in the house's northeast corner. Although these rooms would have contained various items, pottery remains stress the storage of liquids, as does the discovery of a scarab seal belonging to "Anen, Superintendent of the Beer Chamber."

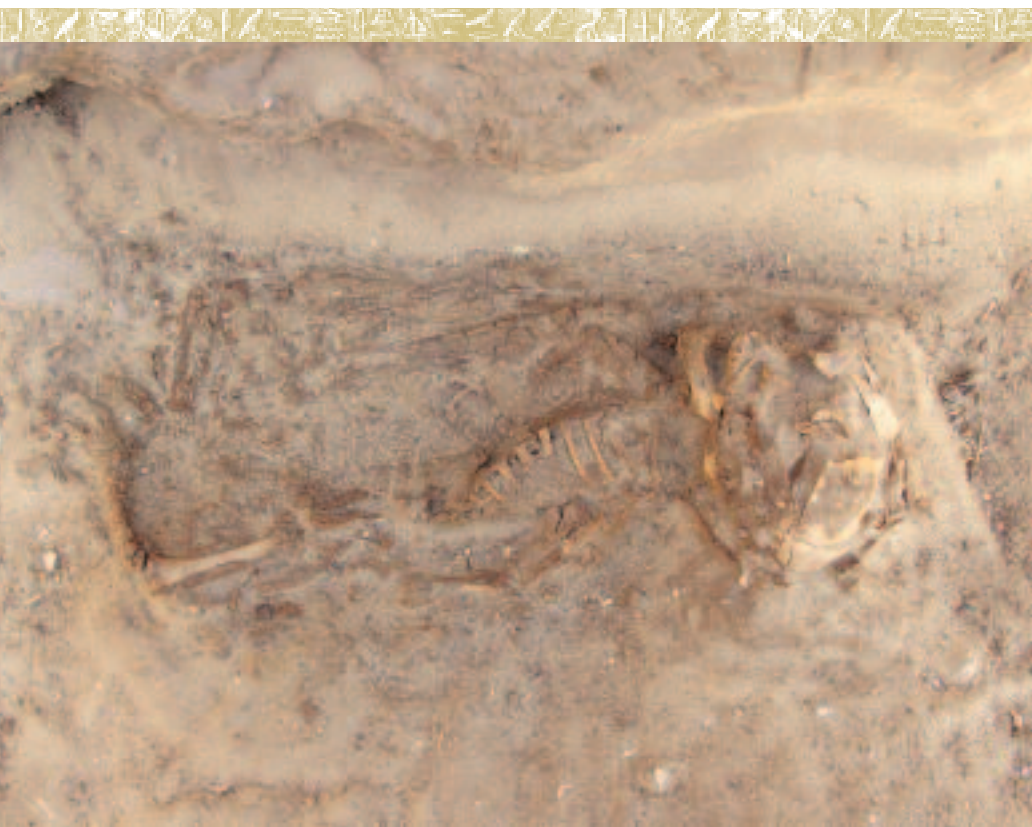
Elite houses often had secondary residential units commonly interpreted as space for the homeowner's wife or eldest son. Building E had one on its west side, consisting of three connected rooms fronted by a small hall or miniature courtyard. Ephemeral hearths, a brick oven, and an inset water jar in this sector are consistent with residential use, while the placement of its doors (on alternating sides of rooms) and the small screen wall near its front entrance hints at consideration for privacy. Building E's northwest corner probably did not form part of this secondary apartment, but poor preservation and incomplete excavation mask its precise function.

At one time or another, changing needs required alterations in houses. In Building E, keeping the west apartment private may have prompted renovations to obstruct access to this area. For example, following the raising of the floor of its access corridor (which ran through the south side of the house before turning 90 degrees along the west side), a circular brick pot emplacement and a thin blocking wall were inserted. It is tempting to interpret this change as a means of isolating the west apartment from the building's southwest corner, where a room with an enigmatic oven or kiln and a very thick deposit of ash seem to bear witness to some kind of industrial activity, the nature of which remains to be clarified by future excavation.

LIVING IN LARGE HOUSES


Who circulated in this elite community? A partial roster of *Wah-Sut's* high society and their support personnel comes from the mud seal impressions once affixed to containers and doors, which were employed diligently in the Middle Kingdom to track ownership and jurisdiction in state-affiliated settings. Examples from in and around Building E include mayoral seal impressions, particularly those of the town's sixth mayor, Sehetepib, and one mentioning the "Daughter of the Mayor," whose name is not fully preserved.

Another notable figure was "Nefru-Khnum, Foreman of Recruits." Seal impressions from both the town and Senwosret III's mortuary temple attest to a local military presence in *Wah-Sut*. While Nefru-Khnum may have been a military official, his title, which was also carried by people overseeing laborers, may suggest that his duties resembled those of a member of an army corps of engineers. Also attested at the temple, a man named Nehri apparently lived in the elite sector when not performing his duties as a purification priest.



Infant burial 147/13 was one of five discovered beneath the floors of Building E.

Impressions from neighboring elite houses identify each of three women (Aahathor, Bebi, Nebetneheh) as “Lady of the House,” a title primarily conveying married status. However, 45 attested impressions for a woman named Ipi carry the title “Chamber Superintendent,” indicative of specific administrative authority. Most were uncovered in the central room along Building E’s south wall. The rest were distributed from the vestibule of the house’s southern doorway out to a trash deposit covering the entire area immediately south of the house.

Some nameless individuals found in Building E illustrate that even elites suffered hardships. Five infant burials were found beneath house floors. A byproduct of high infant mortality rates in ancient times, such burials were common throughout the town, with preliminary assessments suggesting a roughly even sex distribution and ages ranging from prenatal to well over a year. While interment in ceramic jars was a common Egyptian burial method in other settlements, it is not found in *Wah-Sut*. Two baby burials in Building E, however, did show evidence of burial in wooden boxes with one infant provided with a necklace of carnelian and bone beads. 

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For Further Reading

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