

BENEATH THE

Mountain-of-Anubis

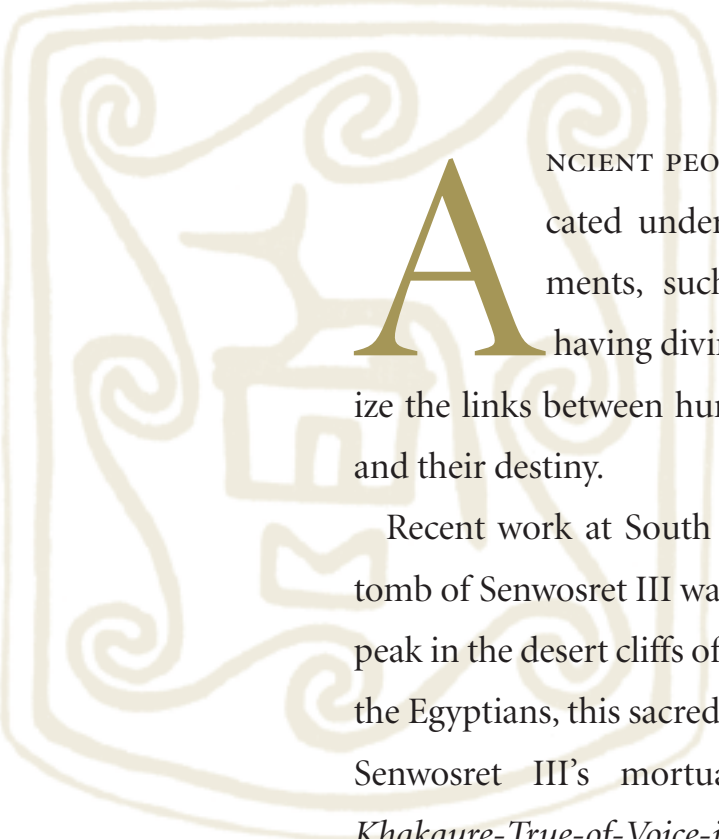
Ancient Egypt's First Hidden Royal Tomb

BY JOSEF WEGNER



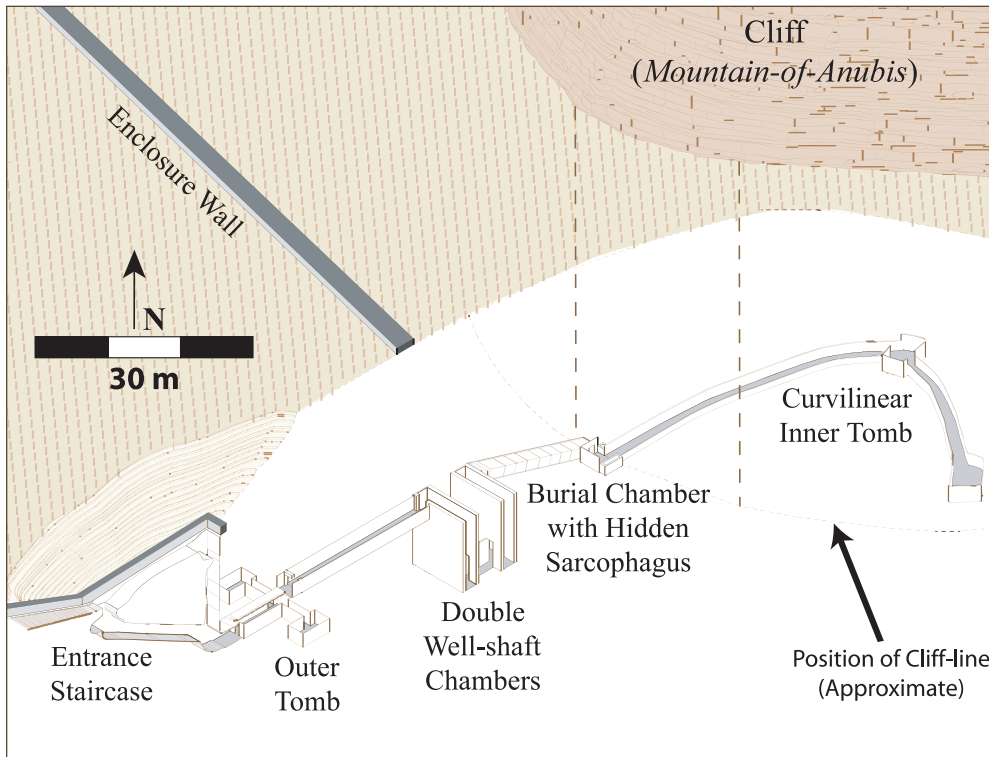


The subterranean tomb of Senwosret III is located at the base of the *Mountain-of-Anubis*.



ANCIENT PEOPLES THROUGHOUT the world had sophisticated understandings of their landscape. Specific elements, such as mountains, were often identified as having divine meaning. These were used to conceptualize the links between humans and the forces that governed creation and their destiny.

Recent work at South Abydos has revealed that the subterranean tomb of Senwosret III was built at the foot of a prominent, pyramidal peak in the desert cliffs of Abydos. Named the *Mountain-of-Anubis* by the Egyptians, this sacred mountain formed the conceptual anchor of Senwosret III's mortuary complex, *Enduring-Are-the-Places-of-Khakaure-True-of-Voice-in-Abydos*. The design of the tomb and the way in which it relates to this mountain peak provide important clues for understanding Middle Kingdom ideas about the royal afterlife.



This isometric drawing of the tomb of Senwosret III shows its subterranean relationship to the limestone cliffs above. The tomb's interior is built around a centrally positioned burial chamber in which the royal sarcophagus was hidden. The outer part of the tomb (before the burial chamber) has a predominantly linear design that descends to a tremendous depth and terminates in two deep, paired, shaft-like chambers. The inner half of the tomb (after the burial chamber) has a curving configuration that swings in a great arc to face toward the eastern horizon. Like all known royal tombs dating to the Middle Kingdom, this one has no decoration on its interior. During this period, royalty probably used funerary texts written on papyrus or on the burial equipment such as the coffins.

THE INNOVATIVE DESIGN OF A HIDDEN ROYAL TOMB

The tomb of Senwosret III is a magnificent example of ancient Egyptian royal mortuary architecture and a truly remarkable engineering achievement. Hewn into the limestone bedrock 30 m (100 feet) below the desert surface, this mammoth tomb extends below ground for 180 m, with its inner half lying beneath the limestone cliffs. The majority of its interior architecture was laboriously lined with finely dressed limestone and red quartzite masonry.

An important aspect of the tomb's architecture is its emphasis on concealment and protection. Its builders prevented access to the royal burial chamber by plugging the entrance corridor with 14 granite blocks, the largest weighing about 215 tons. The quartzite lining of the burial chamber also hid the location of Senwosret III's sarcophagus and canopic

chest. Despite these, and other ingenious devices, its concealment ultimately failed, and ancient tomb robbers plundered the tomb.

Although a number of features of this tomb can be traced to earlier Middle Kingdom royal pyramids, its architecture more closely parallels the design of later New Kingdom royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings in Thebes. For example, the parallel well-shaft chambers in its outer section may represent a symbolic association with the idea of the sun's descent into the realm of Osiris. Both the shaft chamber and the curvilinear design and changing axis of the tomb's inner elements also occur in the 18th Dynasty tombs in the Valley of the Kings (ca. 1500–1300 BCE).

The design of Senwosret III's tomb suggests an architectural expression of a particular form of ancient Egyptian royal funerary literature called the *Amduat*. This text first appears as painted decoration on the walls of royal

burial chambers during the early 18th Dynasty in the Valley of the Kings. The actual ancient Egyptian name of the text—*The-Book-of-the-Hidden-Chamber*—reveals its primary focus as a netherworld guide through the 12 hours of the night (Egyptian *Duat*, or netherworld) that allowed the pharaoh to merge with Osiris and the sun-god Re in a hidden chamber located at the midpoint of the sun's nightly journey. This mystical union permitted an eternal rebirth on the eastern horizon of heaven.

With its centrally positioned burial chamber, hidden sarcophagus, and other features, Senwosret III's tomb seems to reflect the idea of this netherworld passage, perhaps making it the earliest example of a royal *Amduat*-tomb. At the very least, this tomb was a purposefully hidden royal burial place, the first such in Egyptian history and a critical developmental link between the earlier pyramid tradition and the famous tombs of Egypt's Valley of the Kings.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE MOUNTAIN-OF-ANUBIS

Among ancient Egypt's rich pantheon the most familiar and recognizable deity is the jackal god Anubis, best known for his role as the god of mummification. Funerary scenes often show Anubis preparing the body of the deceased for its passage to the netherworld. Seen in a form called *Anubis-who-is-upon-his-mountain*, we also know Anubis as necropolis protector, perhaps best illustrated in the Valley of the Kings during the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1050 BCE) when necropolis seals bore the image of Anubis dominating Egypt's traditional



Royal necropolis seals from the Valley of the Kings (New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty) include Anubis as protective cemetery god.

enemies. These enemies were the “9-bows” who symbolized chaotic forces that might threaten the integrity of royal burials and the pharaohs' afterlife.

In 2004 in the tomb enclosure of Senwosret III, we discovered a series of clay seal impressions closely related to the necropolis seals from the Valley of the Kings. These impressions were produced from a single seal inscribed with the figure of Anubis, reclining upon a shrine. Below the shrine is the hieroglyphic symbol for mountain, in English, *Mountain-of-Anubis*.



The necropolis seal from the funerary enclosure of Senwosret III is inscribed with *Mountain-of-Anubis*.



This ancient seal has helped us understand the constellation of features found in the mortuary complex of Senwosret III. In 1994, when first starting work at South Abydos, I had already noticed that the tomb's natural setting possessed unique physical qualities. While the cliffs that frame the wider desert area of Abydos look different from various perspectives, the area chosen for Senwosret III's tomb—the base of the highest, most prominent part of the cliffs—blocks all of the adjacent cliffs from view. This imparts the visual impression of a freestanding, natural, pyramid-shaped mountain, the perfect substitute for the traditional built pyramid. Senwosret III's architects positioned his tomb to make use of this mountain peak, and they built his tomb underground, beneath it.

With the discovery of the official necropolis seal impressions in the tomb enclosure we can identify the *Mountain-of-Anubis* as the divine name for this mountain. More widely, *Mountain-of-Anubis* also referred to the tomb enclosure of Senwosret III. Anubis, therefore, was manifest here both in his role as protector of the royal burial place—*Anubis-who-is-upon-his-mountain*—and in the form of the actual mountain which sat above the royal tomb!

THE PROCESSIONAL ENTRANCE TO THE UNDERGROUND TOMB

When Arthur Weigall discovered the tomb of Senwosret III in 1902 he had hundreds of men excavate through approximately 12 m (40 feet) of desert sand to find bedrock and locate its entrance. One visitor in 1903 described the resulting pit through the loose desert sand as the “devil's punch bowl.” To prevent the sides of the pit from collapsing, Weigall and later Charles Currelly erected unmortared brick retaining walls.

When our work on the tomb began in 2004 we opened a larger area than Weigall had, allowing us to secure the excavation's boundaries well beyond the tomb's entrance. While doing so, we removed many of the loose bricks from the earlier dig and discovered a major architectural feature that had been previously missed—a beautiful brick staircase with wide shallow steps descending from the desert surface down to the tomb's entrance.

This staircase confirms that the tomb was intentionally built without a superstructure and that it was meant to be hidden. After the tomb was sealed, both it and its staircase would have rapidly become cloaked by the windswept sand of the low desert or even intentionally filled in. Its gentle, shallow steps also suggest that it was probably designed to be used ceremonially, perhaps in a religious procession that culminated inside the tomb, such as the burial rites of Senwosret III.



A processional staircase descending to the tomb entrance was discovered in 2004. Walls on either side, plastered with gypsum whitewash, allow it to descend through the loose sand of the desert.

One Pharaoh, Two Tombs

Most Egyptian pharaohs possessed only a single tomb, leaving little doubt as to where they were buried. But Senwosret III belongs to a small group of pharaohs who built multiple tombs. How were his different tombs used and where was he actually buried?

Like all of his predecessors in the 12th Dynasty, Senwosret III built a pyramid complex in northern Egypt, at Dahshur, just south of Memphis. Senwosret III's pyramid is considered by many Egyptologists to be his logical burial place. In contrast, his second tomb, the mortuary complex at South Abydos, is generally considered to be a royal cenotaph—a symbolic tomb associating him with Osiris.



Senwosret III built his pyramid at Dahshur.

Since 1990 the pyramid at Dahshur has been the focus of excavations by the Egyptian Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Met's expedition has revealed a large and complex site with burials of royal women and nearby tombs of high officials from the reign of Senwosret III. The pharaoh's tomb beneath the pyramid, however, appears to be entirely unused, contrasting dramatically with the extensive techniques used inside the tomb at Abydos to protect the royal sarcophagus. Our recent investigations provide strong evidence that Senwosret III was buried beneath the *Mountain-of-Anubis* rather than at Dahshur.

Why did this pharaoh build two tombs, and why might he have chosen to be buried at Abydos? An inscribed stela set up

by Senwosret III's treasurer, Ikhnofret, might provide a clue. Dating to Year 19 of Senwosret III's reign, this object discusses a royal commission to completely renovate the temple of Osiris at Abydos. Since the main phase of construction of the Dahshur pyramid had already been completed by this date, it is possible that Senwosret III's personal interest in the cult of Osiris—which may have intensified over time—led him to build his tomb and mortuary complex at Abydos. Another stela erected by Nebipusenwosret, one of his officials, at Abydos after the pharaoh's death was intended to “witness the divine beauty of king Khakaure-Senwosret.” Does this imply that Senwosret III's final resting place was indeed Abydos?

Although many questions remain, we hope that continued explorations at Dahshur and South Abydos will provide further perspective on why this pharaoh built two tombs—a traditional pyramid and an innovative subterranean tomb—and in which it now appears probable he was buried.



The stela of Nebipusenwosret from Abydos (now in the British Museum) was dedicated to the memory of Senwosret III.

Josef Wegner

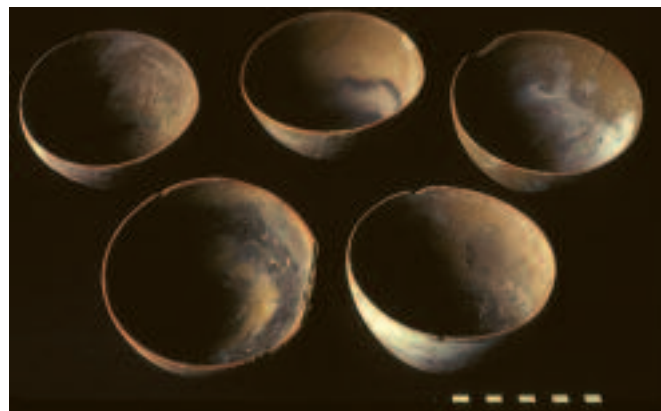


A ritual purification house stood at the entrance to the tomb enclosure.

A RITUAL PURIFICATION HOUSE

Further support for the existence of royal funerary ceremonies held here comes from the aboveground features found within the 5-m high walls of Senwosret III's T-shaped tomb enclosure. This enclosure originally contained buildings of different types, however, most of these structures were purposefully razed or buried inside dummy mastabas (S7 and S8) immediately following the completion and closing of the subterranean tomb.

One structure that survived was a small building (7.6 x 12.3 m) standing in a low hollow just outside the enclosure's entrance. In 2004 we excavated this simple two-room structure and discovered something entirely unforeseen. Piled outside was a dense deposit of discarded water jars and an astounding concentration of different types of bowls, all containing a residue of burnt incense resin. In contrast to the standard incense offering found in ancient Egyptian temples (where a special burner is used before a deity), the volume of incense burning seen here suggests that this building was used to ritually purify or fumigate people or materials before they entered the tomb enclosure.



Small cups were used to burn incense inside the ritual purification house.

This type of building was known to the ancient Egyptians as a *per-wabet* ("house of purification"). Inside its inner room we found a 1-m high brick bench adjacent to a small niche with a limestone base—the apparent focus of a ritual purification ceremony. Such purification rites were required for those entering a sacred space and/or performing religious rituals, such as royal mortuary ceremonies. Could this indicate that Senwosret III was actually buried here at Abydos?

REOPENING THE TOMB

When the Egypt Exploration Fund ended its work in 1903, they left the entrance to Senwosret III's tomb open to the elements. The steep sandy sides of the pit eventually collapsed, filling the tomb's entrance, while the relentless winds gradually buried the site under 15 m of sand.

When we arrived in 1994 the tomb's location was marked by a vast sandy bowl. Using as many as 200 men we re-excavated the entrance over the course of 5 months in 2004 and 2005. On December 26, 2005, we were rewarded with the first glimpse of the tomb in just over a century.

Heat and humidity were oppressive inside the tomb, making photography and architectural planning difficult. One immediate reality, which I had anticipated, was that the tomb interior had not been properly excavated in 1902–1903, leaving most of it filled with debris. Nevertheless, we were able to complete a photographic survey and plan of the interior architecture, discovering considerable errors in the 1903 sketch plan of the tomb.

Since the extent of the earlier excavation was limited primarily to the burial chamber and only two other rooms, we expect that the largely unexcavated portions of the tomb will provide material evidence of its original use and contents. In coming seasons, we also hope to determine when and how the tomb was plundered by ancient robbers as we systematically excavate the full tomb and begin the restoration of its magnificent architecture, transforming it in future years into a monument for all to visit. 🏠

JOSEF WEGNER is Associate Professor of Egyptian Archaeology in Penn's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and an Associate Curator in the Museum's Egyptian Section.

For Further Reading

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Wegner, Josef, and Muhammed A. Abu el-Yazid. "The *Mountain-of-Anubis*: Necropolis Seal of the Senwosret III Tomb at Abydos." In *Timelines: Studies in Honour of Manfred Bietak*, edited by Ernst Czerny, Irmgaard Hein, Hermann Hunger, Dagmar Melman, and Angela Schwab, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 149, pp. 399-415. Leuven: Department Orientalistiek, 2005.

Top, the tomb entrance was re-excavated in 2004–2005. Middle, the first chamber inside the tomb is a limestone room with a roof of simulated logs. Bottom, a fallen granite stone blocks the inside of the tomb.

