

POWER

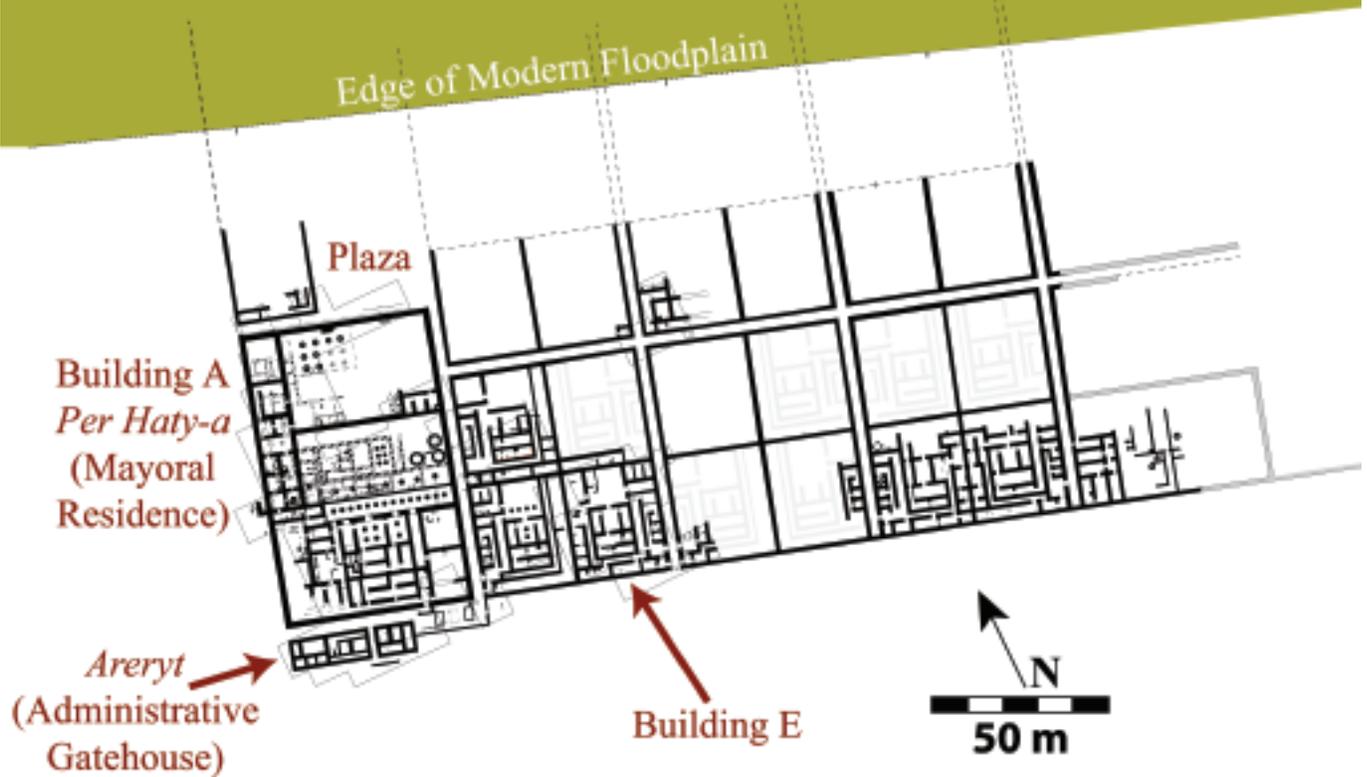
ECHOES OF

The Mayor's House of Ancient Wah-Sut

BY JOSEF WEGNER

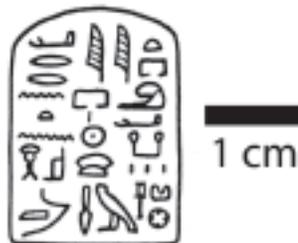
THROUGHOUT HISTORY, THE economic, religious, and social life of settlements has centered on special buildings such as temples, churches, post offices, and town halls. For the community of *Wah-Sut* (ca. 1850 and 1700 BCE), the Mayor's House (Egyptian *Per Haty-a*) was the focus of social and economic interaction. We first discovered the mayoral residence in 1994 when we began excavating to the south of Senwosret III's mortuary temple where the surface indicated the presence of a large structure. Subsequent seasons revealed the building's palatial proportions (52 x 82 m)—a footprint even larger than the nearby temple. With substantial 1.6-m thick external walls, this building—designated Building A—was clearly designed to impress and would have been an imposing sight on the landscape.

(North and east edges of *Wah-Sut* town site are undefined.)



Town plan showing the mayor's residence.

Based on our retrieval in 1997 of clay seal impressions with a lengthy hieroglyphic text—"Administrative gatehouse of the house of the mayor of *Enduring-Are-the-Places-of-Khakaure-True-of-Voice-in-Abydos*"—we identified Building A as the residence of a series of mayors, the preeminent local officials of the town of *Wah-Sut*. More than a residence, however, it doubled as the principal administrative center for Senwosret III's mortuary foundation, serving also as the "town hall" and "post office." Accommodating its multiple functions, the building does not have a single unified floor plan. Instead, a series of room blocks—functionally distinct sections—were originally arrayed around a grand central courtyard.



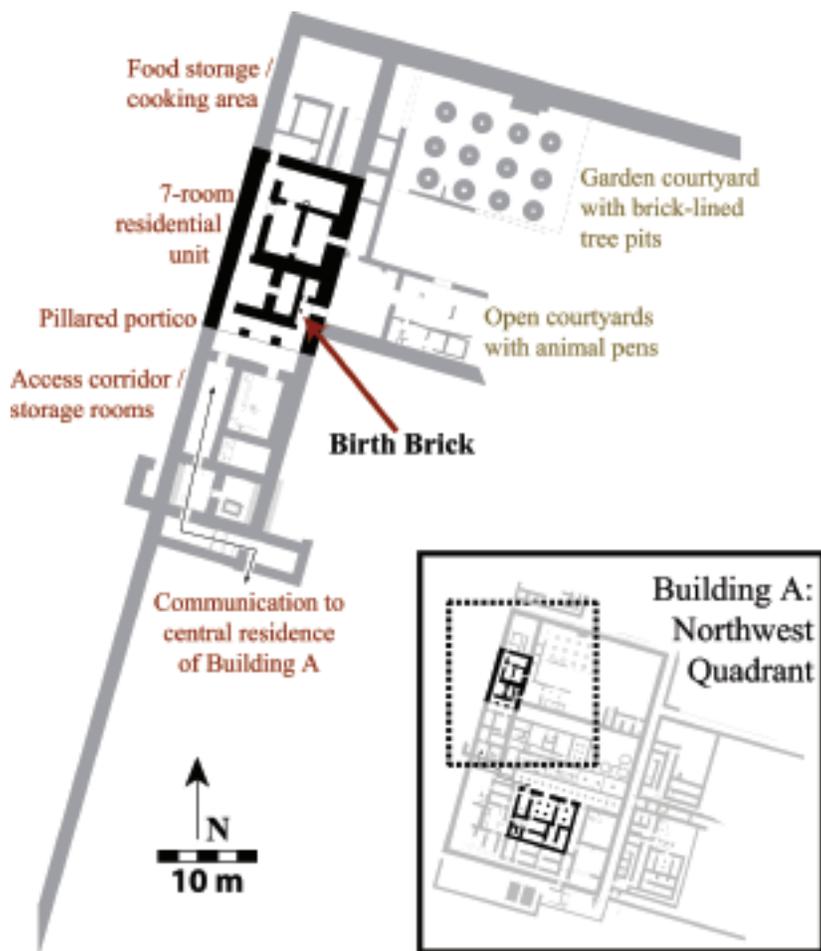
The stamp seal of the *areryt* reads: "Administrative gatehouse of the house of the mayor of *Enduring-Are-the-Places-of-Khakaure-True-of-Voice-in-Abydos*."

The most important of these blocks was the main residence which stood on a raised platform at the back of the building. This residential block was originally fronted by a 42-m long pillared portico supported by 8 massive columns and a 38-m long enclosed hall containing 14 columns. These colonnaded spaces created an impressive architectural entrance to the personal apartments of the mayor and his closest family members. One such chamber contains the remains of a "bed-niche" and probably indicates where the mayors once slept.

Other sections of the building were used for administrative activities and the storage and processing of commodities. Over time much of this building was substantially remodeled for different uses. With each successive season we continue to add to our understanding of this local seat of power and its evolving use over the course of its 150-year occupation.

WAH-SUT'S MAYORS: A LOCAL DYNASTY?

Egypt's late Middle Kingdom challenges traditional explanations about the relationship between royal power and governmental organization. During the transition from the 12th to the 13th Dynasty (*ca.* 1780 BCE) governmental functions and Egyptian society at large did not undergo any rapid



The northwest quadrant was probably a female residential area.

transformation. What did change, however, was the nature of the pharaohs' reigns. Instead of the long stable reigns that characterized the 12th Dynasty, the 13th Dynasty witnessed a rapid succession of short-reigning pharaohs—some 50 over the course of about a century. Yet, while pharaohs came and went at a pace faster than many modern politicians, Egypt's intricate and efficient government continued to operate smoothly. With many of the government's highest officials serving longer than most pharaohs, some have suggested that royal authority was co-opted at this time by noble families.

Our evidence at South Abydos confirms the stability of government and officialdom during the period of short-reigning pharaohs. Archaeological deposits in and around the mayor's residence contain clay seal impressions with the names and titles of a series of mayors who ruled *Wah-Sut* from its founding around 1850 BCE until the end of the 13th Dynasty (*ca.* 1700 BCE). Based on the stratigraphy of these deposits, we can establish their chronological sequence:

(1) Nakhti, (2) Nakhti's son Khentykhety, (3) Neferher, (4) Amenyseneb, (5) Pahapy, and (6) Sehetepib. These men designated themselves as both the mayor (*haty-a*) of *Wah-Sut* and the overseer (*imy-r hut-netjer*) of Senwosret III's mortuary temple. One of these men, Nakhti, was definitely succeeded as mayor by his son Khentykhety, suggesting that this sequence of mayors may represent a hereditary succession, a local mayoral dynasty. Three of the mayors (Nakhti, Khentykhety, and Sehetepib) appear to have had quite long careers as indicated by the appearance of their administrative seal impressions in archaeological deposits for 30 years or more. With the average mayoral career lasting about 25 years—well beyond the reign of contemporary pharaohs—it seems likely that these officials faced no significant challenge to their administrative offices at South Abydos and wielded significant power during this period.

THE MYSTERY OF PRINCESS RENISENEB

Also dating to the 13th Dynasty is an intriguing set of discoveries we made in Building A in 1999 and 2001. In its northwest quadrant we uncovered an area which had undergone a series of major renovations during the middle

of the 13th Dynasty. Originally designed as a block containing large granaries and storage rooms, this area was rebuilt as a separate 7-room house with a pillared porch facing the back of the main residence. Contemporary with, and adjacent to, this remodeling was the addition of a formal garden courtyard—a large rectangular open space with a 3 by 4 grid of 12 subterranean brick planters. Within these planters we discovered the



This clay stamp sealing belonged to Nakhti, the first known mayor of *Wah-Sut*. It reads "Mayor and overseer of temple ritual objects, Nakht."



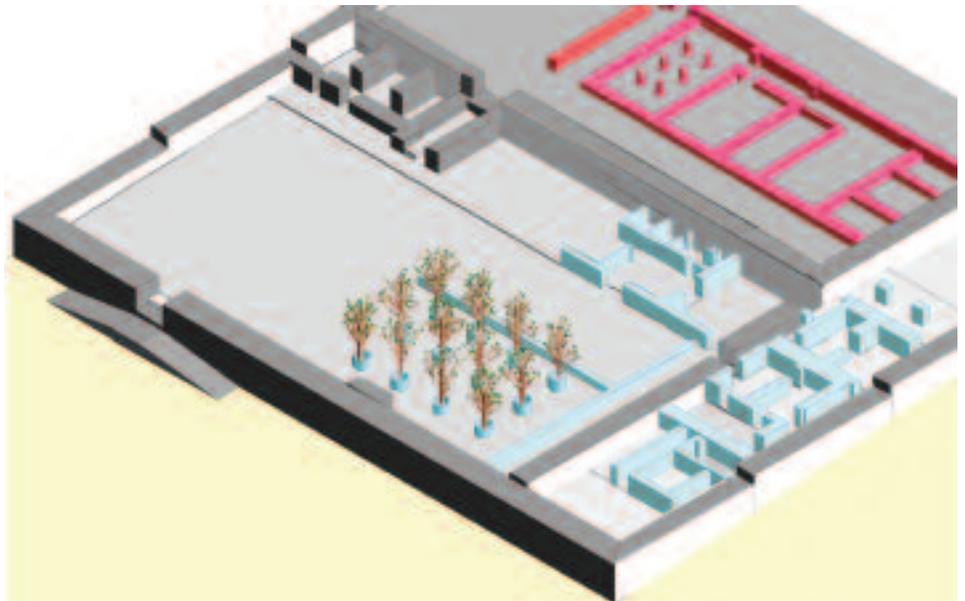
In 2001 we excavated the garden courtyard, the main gateway, and the plaza.

roots of sycamore fig trees (*Ficus sycamorus*), a favorite in ancient Egyptian gardens because they were extremely resilient in the low moisture at the desert's edge. The construction of this 7-room house along with its garden courtyard converted a former storage space into a special residential area—but for whom?

In and around this same area we also recovered many clay seal impressions. A large number were made by a scarab seal with the name of a princess, “the noblewoman and king’s daughter Reniseneb.” These seal impressions cluster in Building A’s northwest quadrant and date to the later part of *Wah-Sut’s* history. It seems likely that Reniseneb was the daughter of a middle- or late-13th Dynasty pharaoh who married one of *Wah-Sut’s* mayors. Could the construction of the 7-room building and its garden courtyard have formed a separate female residence within the wider mayoral household connected with the arrival of this princess?

THE MAIN ENTRANCE AND PLAZA

Before 2001 our investigations of Building A’s internal architecture had revealed two entrances into the building. Both of these doors, however, led out the back of the structure, connecting the mayoral residence with its administrative-gatehouse (*areryt*) and serving the supply of its kitchens and



Isometric model of the main entrance, garden courtyard, and associated areas.

THE MAGICAL BIRTH BRICK

In 2001 we discovered a unique object for Egyptian archaeology in the mayoral residence at South Abydos—a polychrome magical birth brick painted with childbirth-related imagery. Egyptologists have long known that it was customary to position special bricks (*meskhenet*) to support a woman squatting during the delivery of her baby. But while the notion of the birth brick was symbolized in divine form by the goddess Meskhenet, this was the first discovery of an actual birth brick.

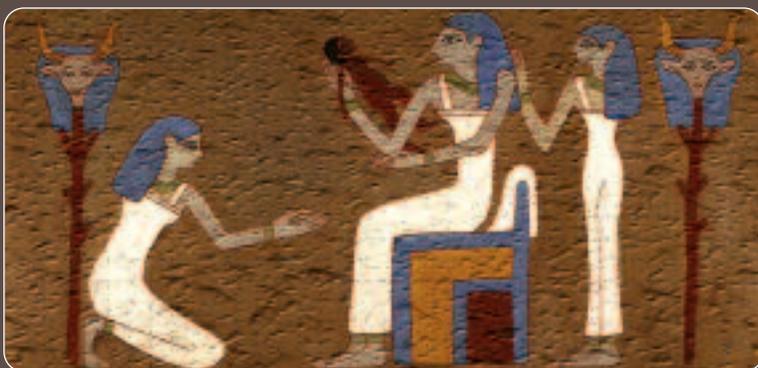
The Abydos birth brick is an unfired mud-brick measuring 36 cm in length. Its sides bear beautifully rendered images of gods and demons known from another class of Middle Kingdom magical object—decorated ivory wands with iconography associated with the protection of children against threatening forces. These magical images invoked the myth of the defense of the baby sun-god Re as he was reborn every day on the eastern horizon. Such wands were meant to transfer divine protection to the human child during birth.

The birth brick also shows a scene of a mother and newborn sitting on a throne. Assisted by two figures and flanked by images of the goddess Hathor depicted atop tree branches, this scene appears to constitute a two-dimensional visual spell to invoke Hathor as well as to symbolically transfigure the mother into an incarnation of Hathor at the moment of birth. This rich iconography suggests the importance of two-dimensional magical imagery which functioned in combination with spoken magical spells and ritual actions during birth.

Although the Abydos brick is currently a unique find, it may be an example of a type of object that was once widespread in ancient Egyptian towns and cities. The production and decoration of *meskhenet* bricks for expectant mothers may have been an important part of the life of communities such as *Wah-Sut* during the late Middle Kingdom.



Dating from 1750 to 1700 BCE, this magical birth brick may have belonged to Princess Reniseneb or another high-status woman in the mayor's residence.



This painted reconstruction shows the mother and newborn scene on the birth brick.

storage areas, respectively. Neither of these doorways could be identified as the type of formal main entrance one might expect on such an important building. Based on the overall layout of rooms and passages inside Building A, such a main entrance probably once existed on the north side, facing the Nile floodplain.

In 2001 we extended our excavations in this direction, down toward the modern town of South Abydos and its cultivated fields. Despite a poorer degree of archaeological preservation than higher up the slope (due to the proximity to modern houses and areas normally covered by animal pens), we were still able to locate the position of Building A's original main entrance. The doorway itself is now entirely destroyed, but the remains of the brick access ramps indicate where it originally stood and how these led visitors up to the elevated threshold of the mayoral residence.

Immediately in front of this gateway we found an expansive, empty zone devoid of buildings. It was also surprisingly free of pottery and other material remains that we typically find dumped in empty spaces in and around the ancient town. In contrast, this 34-m wide plaza in front of the mayoral residence was purposefully kept clean. Although we have yet to completely define its extent north toward the floodplain, all indications suggest that it was an important location dominated by the massive façade and entry ramps of the mayoral residence. As such, it may have been a gathering place for the townspeople and their point of contact with the mayor and his officials.

Flinders Petrie discovered a similar entrance ramp and a plaza combination over a century ago at the planned town of Lahun—the pyramid and cult site of Senwosret II (the father of Senwosret III). The building Petrie designated the “acropolis” is an equivalent structure to *Wah-Sut's* mayoral residence. In front of the acropolis at Lahun stands a building which may have been a local temple dedicated to the god

THE ARERYT

The same clay seal impressions that identified Building A as the mayoral residence also indicated the existence of another structure nearby—the administrative gatehouse (*areryt*). Ancient texts indicate that *areryt* facilities were points of control to administer the flow of goods in and out of major institutional buildings like temples, palaces, and, in this case, a mayoral residence. As such, they would have been beehives of administrative activity staffed with scribes and officials who assisted the mayors of towns and, we hope periodically discarded papyri that might be recovered by archaeologists.

So where was the *areryt* at South Abydos? We discovered it during the early stages of our systematic attempt to map the subsurface deposits of the site using magnetic resonance mapping (magnetometry). Since 2002 Tomasz Herbich of the Polish Academy of Sciences has conducted a comprehensive magnetic survey to explore what lies beneath the often featureless desert sand. Because mud-brick has a positive magnetic charge, due to the iron found in its alluvial sediments, it stands out very clearly against the neutral magnetic background of the desert's siliceous sand. The subsurface results we produced in 2002 showed the outline of a rectangular building immediately behind Building A and accessible through one of its rear doorways. Given its position in relation to the mayoral residence, it seemed that we had found the remains of the administrative gatehouse—the first-ever archaeologically identified example of an *areryt*!



In 2004 we unearthed the remains of the *areryt*.

We excavated this building in 2004 and also exposed two adjacent structures which together comprised the *areryt*. Unfortunately, its architecture was even more eroded than that of Building A—and we did not find any discarded papyri! Nevertheless, the structure remains of considerable importance, and we still hope to find papyrus documents elsewhere in the remains of ancient *Wah-Sut*.

Sopdet, who was venerated alongside the deceased Senwosret II.

Based on the overall similarity in their configurations, there might be an as-yet undiscovered temple on the far side of the plaza at *Wah-Sut*. Although *Wah-Sut* was established to maintain the cult of Senwosret III, its population undoubtedly venerated other gods. If such a local temple were to be found in or adjacent to the plaza fronting the mayoral residence, this would suggest that the architects of South Abydos intentionally created a town center framed by the mayor's residence and an additional religious building serving this community. Such a combination would have reinforced the mayor's civil and economic authority with the religious authority embodied in the nearby temple of a local god. 🏠

For Further Reading

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