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## A New Perspective on Archaeological Fieldwork in Egypt: The Local Workmen of the Asyut Project

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### Abstract

This article critically reflects upon the relationship between the local workmen (all male) of the Asyut Project and the international scientific team working at the site. There are still noticeable traces of the colonial past within Egyptology. Interactions between local communities and archaeologists have only recently led to projects that focus on community engagement and multivocality. This article argues that community engagement can be a promising way not only to further decolonise Egyptology, and especially archaeological work in Egypt, but also to broaden the horizon of scholars by including other voices, methods and interpretations in their research. The local workmen have been almost invisible in published records of archaeological research. In 2011, together with the Egyptian artist Ammar Abu Bakr, I was able to study the relationship between the scholars of the Asyut Project and the local workmen by using methods from the field of social and cultural anthropology. The research comprises 21 semi-structured interviews and 56 structured questionnaires. Based on an analysis of the interviews, I conclude that the relationship between the workmen and the Asyut Project is mainly capitalistic and the workmen are alienated labourers. This is further manifested by a social distance between the international scholars and the local workmen, the language barrier, and the limited time available during fieldwork. It will be shown that the local workmen are interested in the ancient sites and in more communication concerning their meaning and interpretations.

### Keywords

History of Egyptology, postcolonial archaeology, workmen in Egyptology, Asyut

### Zusammenfassung

Im Zentrum dieses Beitrages steht die Beziehung zwischen den lokalen Grabungsarbeitern und dem internationalen Forschungsteam des Asyut Project. Bis heute lassen sich Spuren des Kolonialismus in der ägyptologischen Forschung nachweisen; jedoch mehren sich Projekte mit einem Fokus auf *community archaeology* und *multivocality*. Diese Formen der archäologischen Arbeit öffnen die Archäologie für weitere Interessengruppen, was die Dekolonisation des Faches voranbringen kann. Zwar machen die lokalen Grabungsarbeiter\*innen auf einer Ausgrabung oftmals zahlenmäßig den größten Anteil des Teams aus, finden jedoch kaum einen Platz in den Publikationen. Die folgende Untersuchung basiert auf einer Studie, die ich in Zusammenarbeit mit dem ägyptischen Künstler Ammar Abu Bakr im Jahre 2011 durchführen konnte und 21 halb-strukturierte sowie 56 strukturierte Interviews mit den ausnahmslos männlichen lokalen Grabungsarbeitern des Asyut Projects umfasst. Basierend auf den Interviews wird die Aussage getroffen, dass es sich bei der Beziehung zwischen den lokalen Grabungsarbeitern und dem Asyut Project nicht nur um eine kapitalistische Beziehung, sondern auch um entfremdete Arbeit handelt. Die Zusammenarbeit ist geprägt von einer sozialen Distanz, der Sprachbarriere und der limitierten Zeit des Feldaufenthaltes. Die Untersuchung zeigt jedoch, dass die lokalen Grabungsarbeiter durchaus Interesse an den Altertümern und an einem inhaltlichen Austausch mit dem Team des Asyut Project haben und dass dieses Interesse und ein Wissensaustausch von Vorteil für alle Interessengruppen sind.

### Schlagwörter

Geschichte der Ägyptologie, postkoloniale Archäologie, Arbeiter in der Ägyptologie, Asyut

## Introduction

Conducting archaeological fieldwork in Egypt involves archaeologists getting in contact with local communities, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities,<sup>1</sup> the police, and sometimes even the military. Not only are archaeological sites highly protected and valued by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the responsible inspectors and *Ghafirs*,<sup>2</sup> the sites are also part of living communities. At all sites, stakeholders<sup>3</sup> who have an interest in or a relationship with the archaeological or historical site can be identified. The local work(wo)men employed by an archaeological project are, for example, one interest group. They are not only part of the local community and live among the sites; they also earn their living through archaeological fieldwork. In this paper, the local workmen (all male) of the Asyut Project will be highlighted as one of the many interest groups at the ancient necropolis of Asyut, the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi.<sup>4</sup> The following research questions will be discussed: What are the benefits of community engagement within archaeological research in Egypt? Who are the local workmen of the Asyut Project? How important is archaeological work in the lives of the local workmen? What motivates the local workmen to work with the project? How can the relationship between the local workmen and the scholars of the Asyut Project be described?

This article is based on a research project I conducted together with the Egyptian artist Ammar Abu Bakr in 2011. The results of the study were published in German in 2016, in the book *Perspektivenwechsel. Eine Reflexion archäologischen Arbeitens in Ägypten. Die lokalen Grabungsarbeiter des Asyut Project* (Beck 2016), as part of the Asyut Project series. This paper offers an English summary of that work, supplemented by current studies on the subject. The structure of this paper is twofold. In the first part, I reflect critically upon community engagement in the context of Egyptological research, whereas the second part focuses on the Asyut Project in general and the research project concerning the local workmen. In the latter part, the social and cultural anthropological methods applied in this research will be described and the local workmen will be introduced as one of the many stakeholders at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi. This is followed by a discussion of the archaeological work in Asyut that shifts the perspective to the local workmen. Lastly, the results of this study will be summarised in a concluding section.

## Community engagement and Egyptology

In the past 20 years, postcolonial approaches have become more and more widespread in the archaeologies of Northern America, Europe, New Zealand and Australia (Gosden 2012: 253). Postcolonial theory combines the criticism of the colonial past and its long-term effects with a new perception of how to write and present history by focusing on indigenous and subaltern voices. For archaeologists, this means not only reflecting on how their profession was established, shaped and instrumentalised during colonial times and by representatives of the colonial and imperial powers, but also how to deconstruct work methods or ideas that are still embedded within the old colonial mindset (Lydon and Rizvi 2010: 23; Riggs 2015: 130; Rizvi 2015: 156–157, 2020: 85; Beck 2016: 7, 12–13, 33). Postcolonial archaeology is at its best anti-racist, aims to break free from Western mind sets and introduces new voices, methods and interpretations of the past (Rizvi 2020: 85). Uzma Rizvi argues that archaeology can be decolonised “by incorporating community-based archaeology, public archaeology, and a change in the education and training of archaeologists” (Rizvi 2020: 89).

In 1922, Egypt formally gained independence from Great Britain (Botman 1998: 285) and in 1954 – after the revolution – the Ministry of Antiquities came under Egyptian leadership (Haikal 2003: 124; Wendrich 2010: 190; Beck 2016: 14). Stricter laws were passed in 1983, prohibiting any archaeological finds being taken out of Egypt. Even though the management of antiquities is now supervised by the Egyptian government, traces of the colonial

<sup>1</sup> In December 2019 the Ministry of Antiquities and the Ministry of Tourism merged into the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

<sup>2</sup> *Ghafirs* are the guards of the ancient sites that are paid by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

<sup>3</sup> For a critical reflection on and definition of the term stakeholder, see Matthews 2008: 7–8; Kleinitz, Näser and Altekamp 2013: 357; Beck 2016: 6, fn 19.

<sup>4</sup> In Egypt, mainly men work as manual labours for archaeological missions. Only in the Delta of Egypt are women also occasionally employed (Sonbol 2014: 60).

and imperial past of Egyptology are still noticeable today (Beck 2016: 12–20, esp. 18–20). Susan Pollock states:

“The conditions of archaeological fieldwork in the Middle East are set in the West. These conditions are part of the overarching structures of capitalism, imperialism, and neocolonialism, which, although global in scope and connections, continue to work principally to the advantage of Western governments, peoples, and scholars.” (Pollock 2010: 213)

In addition to Pollock, the Egyptologists Willeke Wendrich and Stephen Quirke also refer to the term neocolonialism when describing the current situation in Egyptology (Pollock 2010: 211–213; Wendrich 2010: 193; Quirke 2013: 394).<sup>5</sup> For Wendrich, neocolonialism is subliminal and unintentional but rooted in western institutions and standards of research, which exclude alternative research methods and perspectives (Wendrich 2010: 194). Similarly, this situation is described as “coloniality” by Ramón Grosfoguel (2002) and Aníbal Quijano (2000, 2007). This term “refers to the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations” (Grosfoguel 2002: 205).

A consequence of neocolonialism or coloniality is the language barrier between the local communities,<sup>6</sup> the local archaeologists, the employees of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the local workmen on the one side and the foreign scholars on the other (Wendrich 2010: 180; Beck 2016: 14–16). Furthermore, a language barrier is noticeable within the discipline, concerning the different languages of Egyptological publications. To this day, there is no consistent “language of scholarship for Egyptology.” Egyptologists still publish in their native languages, including English, German, Arabic, and French, but also in others, such as Italian, Dutch, Russian, and Japanese. Very few, if any, Egyptologists are capable of reading and understanding all these languages, which automatically leads to an exclusion of publications that one can include in one’s research. English has become the main language used in publications as well as for communication on site and for excavation documentation. But what does this mean for scholars whose mother tongue is not English? When writing in another language, one may often find it challenging to understand finer nuances, let alone to make use of sophisticated wordplay. One may be less eloquent and struggle with using the correct syntax, which may detract from the intended meaning. Proofreading and editing, which can be expensive, are often necessary to fulfil the expectations of publishers and readers of English-language publications. The result is a form of discrimination that favours researchers with specific cultural and economic capital.

Right from the beginning, Egyptology practiced in the West systematically excluded Egyptians from scientific endeavours and research results.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, this has changed during the last decades. Many projects publish their results bilingually in English and Arabic, not only in print<sup>8</sup> but also as free downloads on project websites.<sup>9</sup> However, the language barrier remains, especially with the workmen but also with some inspectors of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities as well as with Egyptian Egyptologists who cannot speak English fluently (Wendrich 2010: 180). At the same time, most foreign Egyptologists working in Egypt have only a very basic vocabulary of the Egyptian Arabic language at their disposal, a fact that prevents them from following up on the research results published by their Egyptian colleagues in Arabic (Beck 2016: 14–16). Getting access to research is not only bound to one’s ability to understand the language of publication, but also the availability of the (print) publication itself. Libraries at Middle Eastern universities are not as well-equipped as those in the West. Also, subscriptions for fee-required research websites are often not supported (Pollock 2010: 215; Beck 2016: 14). All this leads to a division of the discipline. On the one hand, there are Egyptian archaeologists who have less access to Egyptological publications, and who may not have sufficient language skills in English, German and French to keep up to date with the current state of research. On the other hand, there are the non-Arabic speaking Egyptologists, most of whom

<sup>5</sup> See also Trigger 2006: 276.

<sup>6</sup> For further information on the term “community” and its definition(s), see McDavid and Matthews 2016: 18; McDavid, Rizvi and Smith 2016: 252; al-Hadad 2020: 83–84.

<sup>7</sup> For the relationship of early foreign Egyptologists with Egyptian Egyptologists, see Reid 2002: 116–118, 211–212; Haikal 2003: 125–127; Wendrich 2010: 187–188; Beck 2016: 14.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, these three publications of the Asyut Project: Kahl 2013, 2018; Eldamaty 2012.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the Heliopolis Project: URL: <http://www.heliopolisproject.org/>; viewed 11.10.2019; the project Urban Development and Regional Identities in Middle Egypt: A Deep History of the Asyut Region: URL: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/research\\_projects/all\\_current\\_projects/asyut\\_urban\\_development.aspx](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/research_projects/all_current_projects/asyut_urban_development.aspx); viewed 11.10.2019; and the Dahshur Project and the Elephantine Project by the German Archaeological Institute: URL: <https://www.dainst.org/standort/-/organization-display/ZI9STUj61zKB/14452>; viewed 11.10.2019.

are not capable of publishing in Arabic or reading the Arabic-language works of their Egyptian colleagues. This situation is frustrating for both the Egyptian Egyptologists and their foreign counterparts.

Interestingly, in her paper *The History of Archaeology through the Eyes of the Egyptian* from 2018, Wendy Doyon (2018: 183) states that after World War I, Arabic was an important language on excavations, not only to organise the labour and labourers but also to manage the finds and document the excavation process on site. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston now holds letters, registers and notebooks written in Arabic by the so-called *Quftis*<sup>10</sup> working for the Egyptian Expedition of the Harvard-University/Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, George Andrew Reisner directed this American archaeological excavation (Doyon 2018: 183). The Arabic field diaries, written by the *Quftis*, were composed in the same manner as the English ones, with a daily entry describing the work progress and going through the units, levels, and finds. Each day the diary of the foreman was translated into more formal Arabic (Doyon 2018: 183). In this way, the whole excavation process was recorded multilingually and from different perspectives. Looking at this approach from colonial times with a postcolonial viewpoint, it appears to be the first attempt at multivocality within Egyptological studies. Also, Doyon (2018: 183) mentions that Flinders Petrie himself was of the opinion that to speak Arabic when working in the field was as important, if not more so, than being proficient in Middle Egyptian. Unfortunately, in current study curricula, Egyptian Arabic classes are never part of a BA/MA programme in Egyptology, and to efficiently study Arabic ‘on the side’ is a time-consuming, individual challenge that lies far beyond the financial means of most students. Furthermore, Doyon rightfully argues that

“had the Arabic diary tradition managed to cross boundary between the field and the academic world, bringing Egyptians’ own experiences of the archaeological landscape into the writing of history alongside English, French, and German, both the practices and the public sphere of archaeology in the Middle East would look very different today.” (Doyon 2018: 190)

With this statement, Doyon also includes the local communities and, as a part of them, the local workmen as well as the *Quftis* working at the archaeological sites, most of whom are excluded from research results and discoveries.

Rizvi (2020: 89) states that a change in the education of archaeologists is one way to decolonise archaeology. In the case of Egyptology, solid Arabic language skills should be a requirement for any archaeologist working in Egypt. Egyptian Arabic classes should not only be available but also part of the study curricula. Most scholars might argue that if modern Egyptian Arabic language courses were part of the curriculum, at least one class with (ancient) Egyptological content would then be lost. However, when scholars understand that Egypt, its people and its modern language are also part of Egyptology, this argument loses its validity. At this point it becomes blatantly obvious that a change in the mindset of Egyptology as a discipline, which is necessary for its decolonisation, is only at its beginning.

Another trait of Egyptology’s neocolonialism is the fact that the local workmen are alienated labourers in Karl Marx’s sense of the word (Marx 2017 [1844]: XXII–XXVII, esp. XXIII). Moreover, the relationship between the archaeologists and the workmen is capitalistic, one that is based on wages (Steele 2005: 50; LaSalle 2010: 405–406; Pollock 2010: 205, 207–208; Beck 2016: 17–18; Mickel 2019: 185). The workmen admittedly do a substantial part of the archaeological work but have no part in the documentation and interpretation of the archaeological data. Furthermore, they are hardly ever given information about the results of an archaeological project (Steele 2005: 50–51; Pollock 2010: 206; Beck 2016: 18). Interestingly, contract labour was founded at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, simultaneously with archaeological fieldwork (Clément 2010: 81, 83). The Egyptologists Heinrich Schäfer (1903), Gaston Maspero (1914) and Georges Legrain (1914) collected and published folk songs that were sung for the workmen by performers, for motivation and comfort when working in this new and strange environment (Doyon 2018: 179). Anne Clément (2010), Doyon (2018) and Allison Mickel (2019) have recently studied these songs.<sup>11</sup> According to Doyon, the content of the songs conveys a frustrating and dark atmosphere (Doyon 2018: 180). She concludes that this alienated, capitalistic relationship was founded right at the beginning of archaeological fieldwork, and the traditional folk songs were instrumentalised to support this new kind of work organisation (Doyon 2018: 180).

<sup>10</sup> In Egyptology, *Quftis* are archaeological labourers, often in leading positions, who come from the Upper Egyptian town of Quft and are descendants of the workmen educated by Flinders Petrie. For the history of the *Quftis*, see Drower 1995: 214.

<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank my colleague Ulrike Dubiel for bringing those publications to my attention.

How can Egyptology overcome this situation? Again, Egyptologists need to rethink their work methods in order to leave neocolonialism and coloniality behind. Apart from a change in the education of archaeologists, a more open archaeology is needed. There are many ways to open up archaeological research to the public. Various forms of community engagement, which include, for example, field schools or projects concerned with cultural heritage management, provide a good first step and a profound way to open Egyptological research to those outside of the discipline, and to those who live close to or among the sites. The ancient Egyptian sites are neither isolated nor invisible; rather, they lie within modern cities or are clearly visible from them. Obviously, they are part of local traditions and oral histories, and, as José Roberto Pellini and María Bernarda Marconetto stated, these stories have so far been ignored by Egyptologists (Pellini and Marconetto 2018; Beck 2016: 69–76). Interaction with the local community at or around a site not only contributes towards decolonizing Egyptology but also helps include other interpretations of the site, in the sense of multivocality (Hodder 2003: 35; Rizvi 2008: 201, 2020: 86, 89; al-Hadad 2020: 84). With the adoption of multivocality, more than one interpretation of an ancient site or ancient phenomena becomes available, opening up scholarly discussion so that it is not only set in the West and directed by western scholarly thought.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Esraa Fathy al-Hadad (2020: 87) notes that community engagement contributes to the protection of a site and might create job opportunities for the locals. Community-based archaeological projects, which are more and more common in archaeology, are multivocal and are executed together with the local community. Here, archaeologists and the community cooperate as equal partners.<sup>13</sup> Engaging with the local community, establishing a community-based archaeological project, embracing multivocality and meeting different stakeholders on equal terms are time consuming and challenging. Each stakeholder is driven by different motivations and has a different background, including knowledge and education. Even if stakeholders form an interest group, this group is not homogenous nor are individuals part of only one specific interest group (Beck 2016: 21). It is challenging to focus on a research project while at the same time balancing the interests of the different stakeholders. There is always the risk of biased interpretations when prioritising the interests of one group, thereby potentially ignoring other perspectives. Rizvi clarifies:

“Community-based praxis is not about patronizing groups of people and claiming that your methods are the best way forward; it is very much about just the opposite – it is about having a methodology that forms and formulates around shared concerns, one that centers sociality and equity in a manner to inform process, and a discipline that recognizes that what is valued is not the end result (because really, research never ends), but that it is in the process that value is placed and understood as rigorous. And so what this really is about then is what we, as a discipline and community of peers, will review and code as valuable.” (Rizvi 2020: 92)

Even though community-based archaeological projects are rare in Egyptology, the increasing number of projects within Egyptological research that engage with the local community points to an ongoing change within the field (see Table 1). Community engagement and easy accessibility of information concerning a site is not only desired by archaeologists but also demanded by local communities. One of the results of a survey concerning public perceptions of archaeological heritage in Upper Egypt, published by Hend M. Abdel-Rahman and David Pokotylo (2017: 124), was that the people living in Deir el-Barsha wish for more information on the site and the archaeological work, in the form of brochures or lectures in a simple language.

Lately, research on workmen in Egyptian archaeology has increased noticeably. These *workmen studies* include research on workmen in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – especially the *Quftis* working for Petrie and Reisner<sup>14</sup> – as well as workmen on current excavations, as carried out by myself within the Asyut Project in 2011 (Beck 2012, 2016, 2019).<sup>15</sup> Concerning the former, the sources of research are diaries, reports and letters by the archaeologists<sup>16</sup> as well as the aforementioned folk songs sung by and for the workmen. These studies are crucial to our understanding of the relationship between the locals who were employed on archaeological sites and the foreign archaeologists at the beginning of archaeological work in Egypt, even though the material basis of research for these studies is limited, biased, and censored. The availability of these records depends on the decisions made by excavators many decades ago, who chose what information was written in their own diaries and publications and whether to keep

<sup>12</sup> For a critical reflection on multivocality in scientific research, see Beck 2016: 21; esp. fn. 123; see also Hassan 1997; Hodder 1997a, 1997b, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> For more information on community-based archaeology, see Strand et al. 2003; Atalay 2012.

<sup>14</sup> See Clément 2010; Quirke 2010; Doyon 2015, 2018; Georg 2018.

<sup>15</sup> For other projects with workmen on current excavations, see Rowland 2014.

<sup>16</sup> See, i.e. Quirke's volume *Hidden Hands* from 2010.

certain other diaries, such as the ones written by the *Quftis*. Although Doyon entitled her article *The History of Archaeology through the Eyes of Egyptians*, her database is rather one-sided, calling for a more thorough reflection on the heavily biased nature of those written records. Mickel, on the other hand, admits that by studying old diaries and reports by archaeologists, one will not get access to the emic perspectives of different workmen. She proposes that these documents should be read in order to understand the excavation practices at that time: “In doing so, the responses of the workers rise to the fore – and the ways in which they may have experienced and resisted the conditions of alienation become apparent” (Mickel 2019: 190). Reflecting upon the past of Egyptology and acknowledging its dependency on colonialism can lead to a shift in today’s research methods, which are not only rooted in colonialism but also reproduce colonial mindsets (Rizvi 2020: 85; Schneider and Hayes 2020: 130). The research on the local workmen of the Asyut Project had a similar aim. This study was conceived as a first step in engaging further with the local workmen, who are part of the local community at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi (see below). It was initiated to build a bridge between the local workmen and the international archaeologists in order to get to know each other better as well as to reflect on the archaeological work and its place in the lives of the workmen.

Year	Project	Place	Coordinators
until 2002	Community archaeology in Quseir (Red Sea)	Quseir (Red Sea)	D. Peacock, L. Blue and S. Moser
2009–2015	‘Archaeotopia: the archaeological site as focus, expression and motor of collective identities’	Carthage, Thebes, Sudan	S. Altekamp, C. Näser und C. Kleinitz
2011–2012	‘Ancient Tombs, Modern Dwellers: Investigating the Relationship of Archaeological Sites to Contemporary Communal Identity in al-Qurna, Thebes’	Qurna	G. Tully
2013–2015	‘Kulturanthropologische Fallstudie in verlassenen nubischen Dörfern in Oberägypten – kulturelle Formierungsprozesse und deren Transformation zu archäologischen Befundkontexten’	Region Aswan	I. Forstner-Müller, L. Zabrana, F. Fichtinger, L. Fliesser, C. Kurtze. Cooperation: N. El-Shohoumi
2013–2018	Initiating and managing the community archaeology component of the Mogratt Island Archaeological Project	Mogratt Island Sudan	G. Tully
2014–2015	‘The Archaeology of the Recent Past on Mogratt Island – using Participatory GIS in mapping “living heritage”’	Mogratt Island Sudan	C. Kleinitz and S. Merlo
since 2014	‘Protecting and presenting Sudan’s World Heritage: A study of tourist behaviour and experience at Musawwarat es Sufra’	Musawwarat es Sufra Sudan	C. Kleinitz
2013–2016	Ethnographic fieldwork in Sai Island (Across Borders team, Julia Budka), Dangeil (NCAM team, Julie Anderson, Salah Mohamed Ahmed and Mahmoud Suliman Bashir) and Bejrabiya (UCL Qatar team, Jane Humphris)	Sai Island, Dangeil, Bejrabiya Sudan	R. Bradshaw
since 2016	‘Urban Development and Regional Identities in Middle Egypt: A Deep History of the Asyut Region’	Shutb	I. Regulski, F. Keshk, A. Sabri, Cairo Urban Sketchers, Takween ICD
2017–2019	Facilitating community engagement and site management planning at Amarna	Amarna	G. Tully
since 2019	‘The place and the people’	Egypt	F. Keshk

Table 1: Archaeological projects in Egypt and Sudan engaging with local communities (selection).

Cooperating with different interest groups and trying to find a way to establish a well-working archaeological project with an emphasis on community engagement is, of course, even more time consuming than ‘conventional’ projects. Furthermore, it remains challenging to receive funding for such projects. Although time-consuming, community engagement does not entail any other disadvantages for Egyptological research. Unfortunately, however, time and money are correlated. However, once it becomes widely accepted that community engagement is valuable for all archaeological research, excuses become less plausible. Also, according to Sonya Atalay (2012: 5–6, 14–15, 27, 217, 220) and Stephanie Moser et al. (2002: 223, 230), archaeological projects that include co-operation with the local community have led to a decrease in looting and an increased awareness for the sites, a situation every Egyptologist wishes for.

Having now discussed some of the advantages of community engagement for Egyptology, the case study of the Asyut Project and its local workmen will be presented in the following section.

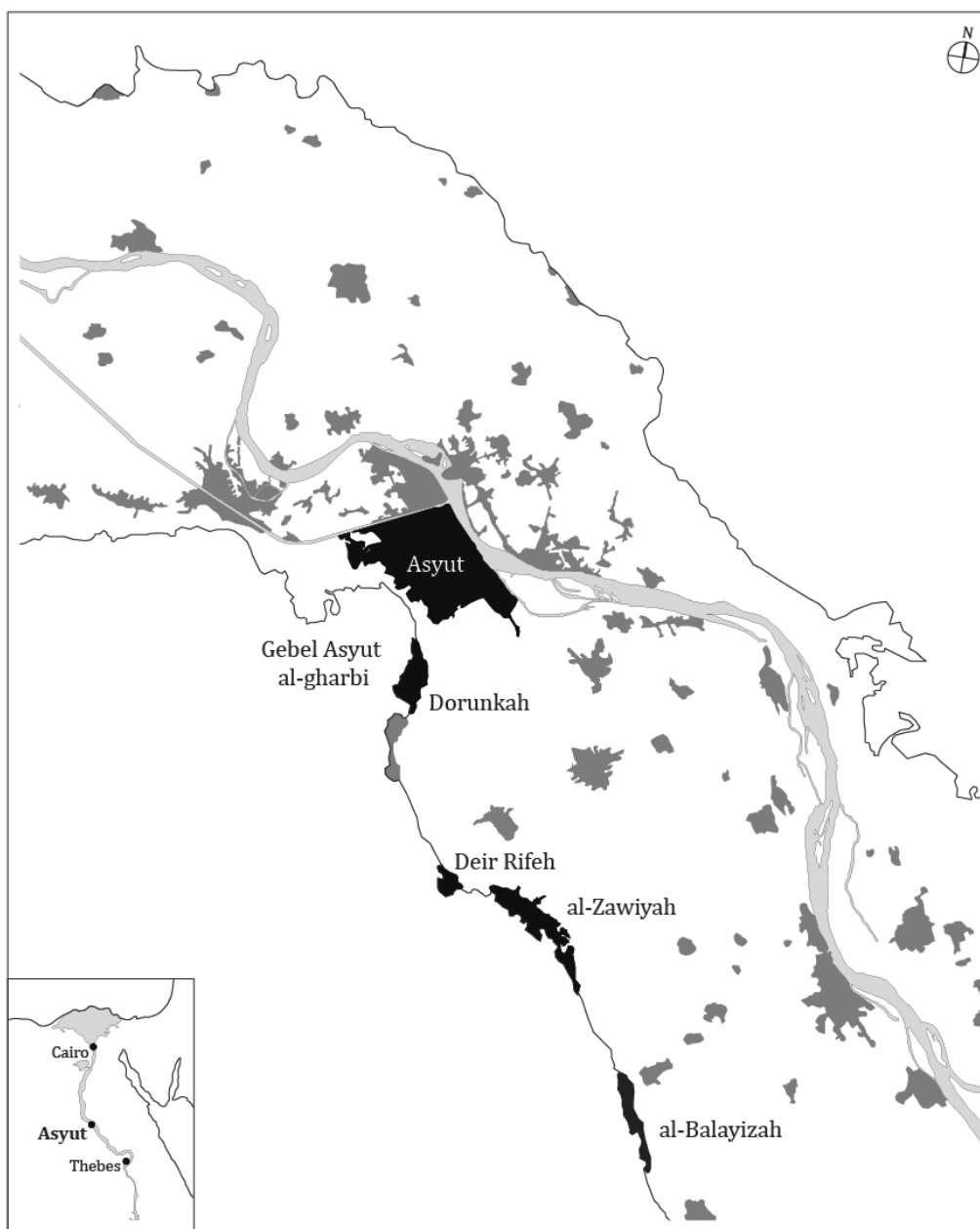


Fig. 1. Asyut and the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi. Image: Tina Beck and Oliver Hasselbach.



## The Asyut Project

### *Introduction: The Gebel Asyut al-gharbi and the Asyut Project*

The city of Asyut is located approximately 370 km south of Cairo, on the western bank of the Nile (fig. 1). In ancient times, Asyut was the capital of the 13<sup>th</sup> Upper Egyptian Nome. The ancient city as well as the temples are covered by the modern settlement. The main archaeological site at Asyut is located on the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi, ‘the western mountain of Asyut’ (fig. 2). This mountain was used as a necropolis as early as the Naqada I–II period (4500–3200 BC) (Rzeuska 2014: 96, 2017: 39–41) and continues to be so used up until today, with the modern Islamic cemetery located at the foot of the mountain (Beck 2016: 25). The Gebel, or rather some of the monuments, became the destination for excursions during the New Kingdom (1539–1077 BC) as shown by the numerous graffiti found there. In later times, hermits withdrew to the mountain, and two Coptic monasteries were constructed there. In addition, the site was used as a quarry. In Egyptology, Gebel Asyut al-gharbi is mainly known for its rock-cut tombs of the nomarchs of the First Intermediate Period (2205–2020 BC) and the Middle Kingdom (2020–1630 BC). Today, a military camp is situated on the mountain, making the site inaccessible to (inter)national tourists (Kahl 2013: 64; Beck 2016: 25).<sup>17</sup> To conduct research at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi, the Asyut Project needs a permit from the military that stipulates that all team members can work at the site daily from 8 am until 4 pm.



Fig. 2. The Gebel Asyut al-gharbi. View from the modern city Asyut towards the ancient necropolis. Image: The Asyut Project.

Table 2 gives an overview of the Egyptological missions that have worked at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi, beginning with the documentation carried out by Jean Baptiste Prosper Jollois and René Édouard Develliers du Terrage for the French expedition under Napoléon Bonaparte. Gebel Asyut al-gharbi was especially popular in the first half of the 20th century, with only occasional brief surveys conducted later, the last one in 1987 (Kahl 2007: 21–29).

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed description of the history of Gebel Asyut al-gharbi, see Kahl 2012: 9–22.

Date	Scholar/researcher
1799	Jean Baptiste Prosper Jollois, René Édouard Devilliers du Terrage (French expedition)
1887, 1888	Francis L. Griffith
1889	Mohammed Halfawee
1893	Percy E. Newberry
1893	Farag?
1897	Farag Ismail, Yasser Tadros
1903	Charles Palanque, Émile Chassinat
1905–1913	Ernesto Schiaparelli
1906–1907	David G. Hogarth
1911, 1914	Pierre Montet
1913–1914	Ahmed Bey Kamal
1921–1922	Gerald A. Wainwright
1931, 1932	Moharram Kamal
1962	Ali Hassan
1986	Diana Magee
1987	Donald B. Spanel
since 2003	The Asyut Project

Table 2: Overview of archaeological fieldwork undertaken at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi.

After a hiatus of more than 15 years, the archaeological fieldwork at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi resumed with a survey by Jochem Kahl and Mahmoud El-Khadragy. In 2004, Ursula Verhoeven joined the team. The project's main objective from 2003–2019 was to study the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi as an ancient Egyptian necropolis.<sup>18</sup> This project was an Egyptian-German cooperation between the Freie Universität Berlin, the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz and the Sohag University. Kahl mentions that the mapping of the site, the documentation and reconstruction of its structures (e.g., inscriptions and architecture) as well as “[p]inpointing the Asyuti traditions and cultural achievements, and thus contributing to the question of regional diversity in Ancient Egypt” (Kahl 2012: 5) were part of the research agenda of the Asyut Project. Since 2020, the Asyut Project focuses on Asyut as a centre for ancient trade. This is an Egyptian-German-Polish cooperation between the Freie Universität Berlin, the Polish Academy of Science, the Sohag University and the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.<sup>19</sup>

### *The stakeholders*

The project conducts work at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi from August until October each year. Clearly, Gebel Asyut al-gharbi is not a hidden site but rather a prominent landmark of Asyut, with the rock-cut tombs and quarries visible from the city and the presence of the modern Islamic cemetery, which continues to grow in size alongside the mountain. At Gebel Asyut al-gharbi, various stakeholders come together, each having their own claim to the site (fig. 3). The mountain is the daily workplace for the *Ghafirs*, the inspectors of the local office of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the soldiers stationed at the military camp. Once a year, the team of the Asyut Project comes to the site to study the ancient necropolis. For the archaeological fieldwork, the Asyut Project employs a foreman, Rais Ahmed Atitou from Quft; a local foreman, George from Deir Rifeh; and up to 80 local workmen (all male) from al-Balayzah, al-Zawiyah, Deir Rifeh and Dorunkah (figs. 1, 7).

<sup>18</sup> The project was financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft from 2005–2019.

<sup>19</sup> This project is also financed by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*. For more information on the Asyut Project and a list of publications, see the project's homepage: URL: <https://www.aegyptologie.uni-mainz.de/the-asyut-project-feldarbeiten-in-mittelaegyptenfieldwork-in-middle-egypt/>; viewed 07.10.2019; or Beck 2016: table 1. See also Asyut – centre of ancient trade: URL: <https://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/aegyptologie/forschung/Drittmittelprojekte/Assiut-handel/index.html>; viewed 14.02.2020.

The group of people who come together for this fieldwork, including the foreign and Egyptian scholars, *Quftis*, local workmen, inspectors, *Ghafirs*, local policemen and restorers, form a somewhat artificial world. All of these individuals come to Gebel Asyut al-gharbi at the same time to work, but with very different backgrounds and motivations. In 2010, Kahl approached me – at that time a student of Social and Cultural Anthropology and Egyptology at the Freie Universität Berlin – with the idea of getting to know the local workmen of the Asyut Project better, most of whom have been working with him since 2004. In the following sections of this paper, the research project will be described, and some of the results, which were published in 2016, will be summarised.

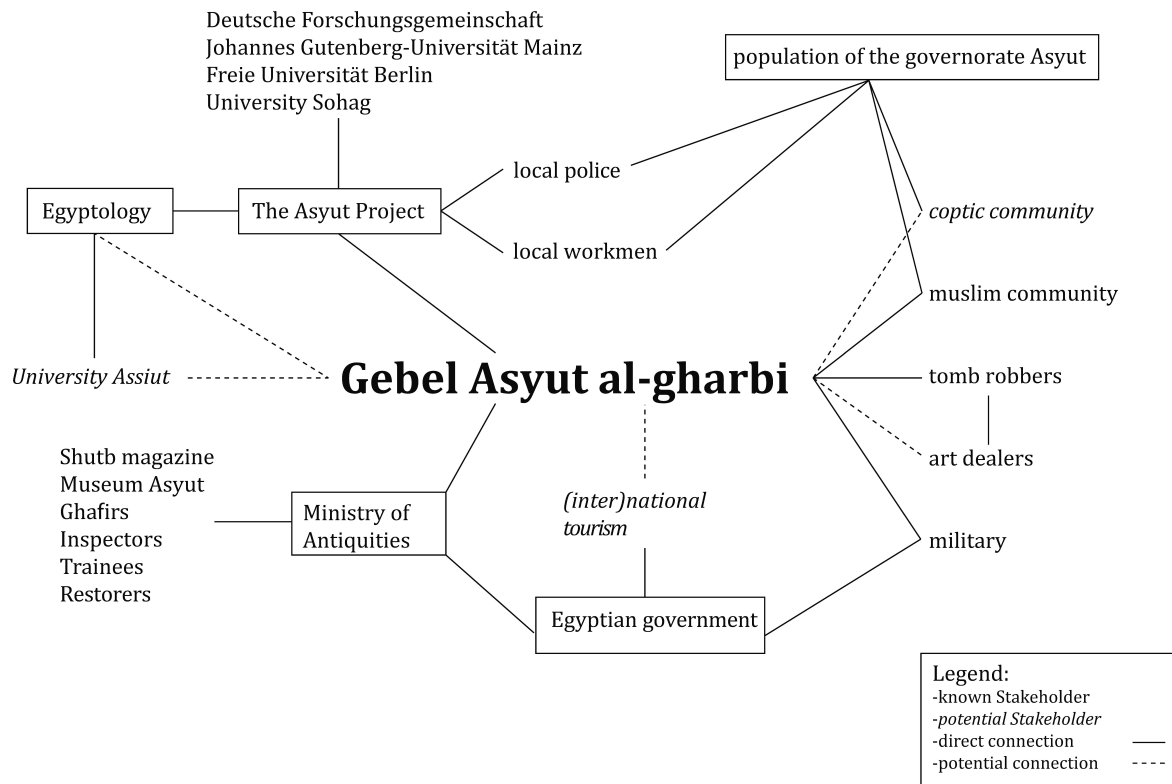


Fig. 3. The various stakeholders at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi. Image: Tina Beck and Oliver Hasselbach.

### Method of research

Clearly, this study needs to be treated as a snapshot. The results, which will be discussed below, are embedded within the social and economic situation in Asyut during the summer months of 2011. This means that the results can be compared to other excavations, but they are obviously not representative of every archaeological project or every workman or woman who is or has been working with international and Egyptian archaeologists since archaeological fieldwork began. Furthermore, the Arab spring of 2011, which was ongoing at the time of the interviews, combined with the rising prices of staple foods, undoubtedly influenced the interviews. In collaboration with Kahl, I prepared several predefined questions to guide the semi-structured interviews before the 2011 fieldwork, which focused on the subject of ‘work’ and especially ‘working at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi’. We decided to forego a recording device for the interviews to avoid an uncomfortable situation for the dialogue partner. The advantage of a semi-structured interview is that the interviewee can take control and talk about topics he or she is comfortable with. The starting question would be simple but open and about work. For example, ‘What did you work on yesterday?’ The talks went off from there in different directions, but usually within the subject of fieldwork. Apart from the semi-structured interviews, 56 workmen provided answers to a structured questionnaire aimed at

obtaining a statistical overview of names, ages, and places of residence. We asked each workman for this information in person due to the high level of illiteracy. Ammar Abu Bakr, who has been working with the Asyut Project since 2006 as illustrator, not only draws archaeological finds but also the scenery of the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi and the different members of the team, including the interviewees.<sup>20</sup> His drawing was for everyone a natural part of the fieldwork, and each workman received his own portrait. With the permission of the workmen, I published the portraits anonymously in 2016.

On the very first day of the 2011 season, the aim of the project was explained to all team members of the Asyut Project, and I, as someone who had not participated in the archaeological fieldwork of the Asyut Project before, was introduced to the workmen. Ammar Abu Bakr was a familiar face to the local workmen, and the start was easy due to his existing connection with some of them. First, one of the water carriers was asked if he wanted to take part in the interviews. He agreed and afterwards suggested we interview his son, and from that point on the project was settled and accepted within the fieldwork and the group of workmen. Each interview took place at the site, either in an empty tomb where no one was working or in the shade outside. After a short while, there were more offers for interviews than we had time for. Initially, the idea was to talk to men from different villages and age groups to get a broader impression of their thoughts. However, since the interest in participating in the interviews was greater than anticipated, it was decided that no potential interview partners should be rejected in order to obtain ‘nice’ statistics, but rather to focus on interviews with the ones who were happy to participate. Some of the workmen were eager to tell their stories about the Asyut Project or share their knowledge about the ancient sites – not only Gebel Asyut al-gharbi but also the necropolis of Deir Rifeh, where they live. Also, the break from archaeological work during a normal workday was much appreciated. They enjoyed the attention and were happy as well as curious that Ammar Abu Bakr and I, as members of the Asyut team, cared about their thoughts and their lives outside the archaeological research. In addition, they used the interviews as an opportunity to ask me questions about my life, my education and about the tombs at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi and the work of the Asyut Project.

Due to the open structure of the interviews, the discussion often became private and confidential. I appreciate the trust and honesty of the local workmen, therefore subjects discussed that did not concern this research were kept off the record. Furthermore, all names used in this and other publications are pseudonyms. In the following paragraphs, the local workmen will be introduced as a heterogeneous group of men. While the 2016 publication contains many citations from the interviews in order to provide a more in-depth impression of the local workmen in the study, only seven statements were translated from German to English for this paper. These statements were chosen because they represent different opinions on the work relationship between the archaeologists and the workmen and the significance of this kind of work in the lives of the workmen.

### ***The local workmen of the Asyut Project***

In this section, the group of people who are referred to as the local workmen will be further introduced. They are men between 16 and 70 years of age who live in the villages close by the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi, in the governorate of Asyut, and earn their wages as day labourers. They work for the Asyut Project in a variety of positions at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi and are paid by the Asyut Project. This definition excludes the *Ghafirs*, the inspectors of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the local policemen, the drivers of the project, and the *Qufti* Ahmed Atitou (Beck 2016: 39).

In 2011, a total of 79 local workmen were employed by the Asyut Project over the course of six weeks. The following statistical overview is based on the 56 structured questionnaires.

As figure 4 shows, the workmen are day labourers, who are engaged in different areas, and some only work with the Asyut Project during the school and university holidays.

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<sup>20</sup> The portraits are also part of the 2016 publication.

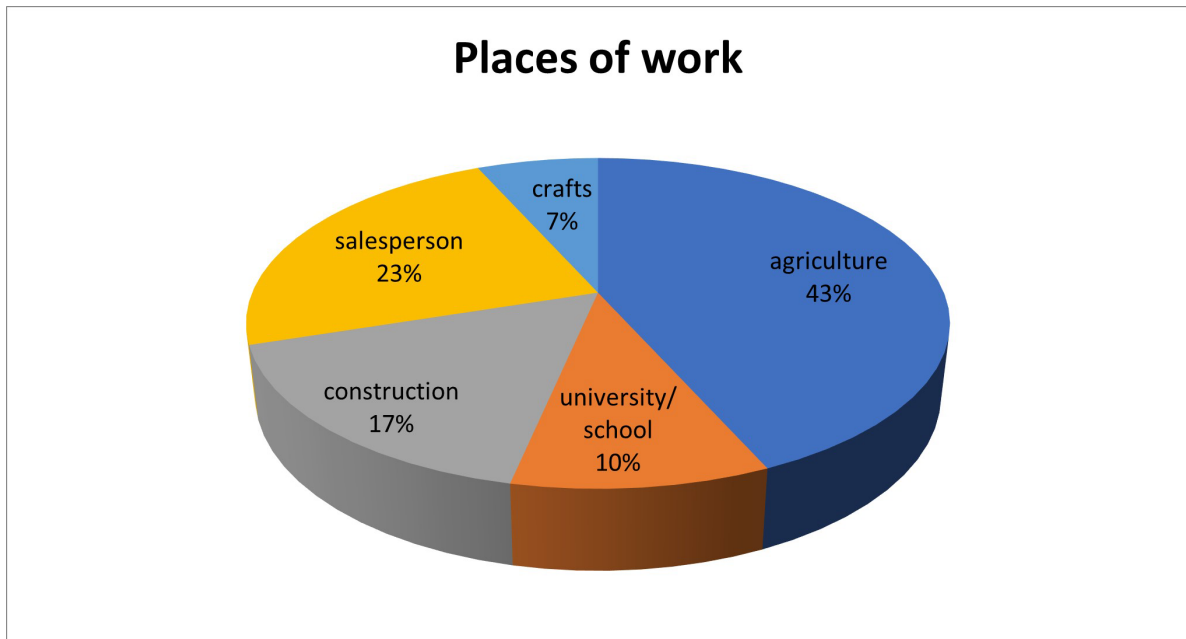


Fig. 4. The fields in which the 21 workmen work (semi-structured interviews). Image: Tina Beck.

Looking at the age distribution, most of the workmen are 16–20 years old, followed by those aged 21–30. Only four are in the 31–40 and 51–60 age groups, seven are aged 41–50 and only one person is over 60 years old (fig. 5).<sup>21</sup> This means that they are at very different stages of their lives. Some are young bachelors, others are married, married with children, or married with adult children. Some were about to leave their village to enter the military, and some had just returned from their military service. As was the case for the structured questionnaire mentioned above, the distribution of interviewees is also not balanced in the case of the semi-structured interviews. The majority of interviewees are between 16 and 20 years of age, five are 41–50 years old, three are 21–30 years old, two are 51–60 years old, and only one is 31–40 years old (fig. 6).

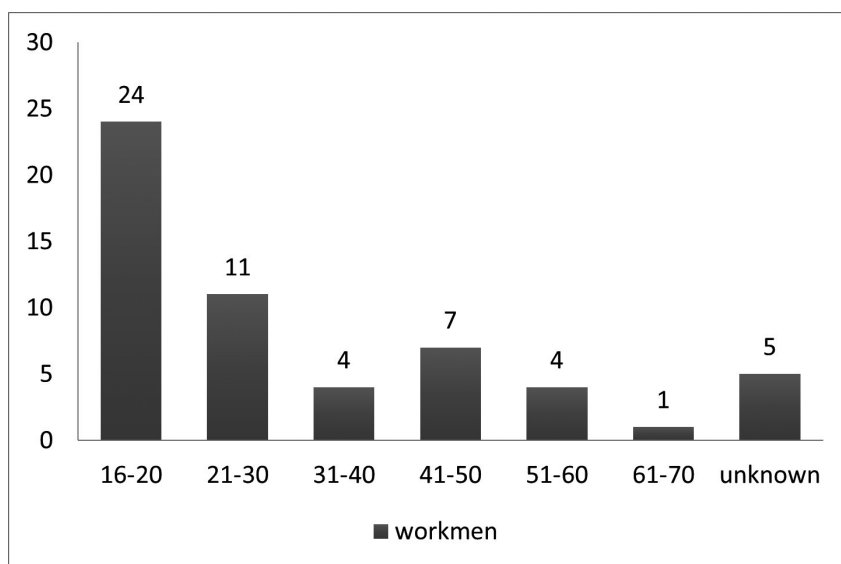


Fig. 5. Statements of age, according to the structured questionnaire. Image: Tina Beck.

<sup>21</sup> Even though not all of the men working for the project provided answers to the questionnaire, the age distribution is, nevertheless, representative. Mostly young men are needed at the site, since the majority of tasks require strength – for example, carrying the soil in baskets, pushing the wheelbarrow, working the pulley, or they must be able to climb up and down the burial shafts. For a definition of the different positions, see below.

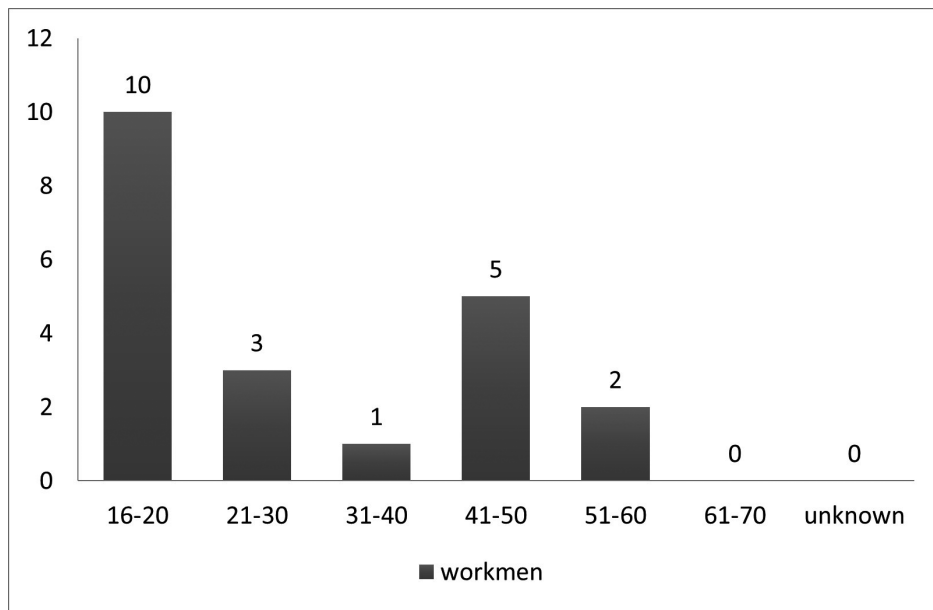


Fig. 6. Age of the 21 workmen from the semi-structured interviews. Image: Tina Beck.

The majority of the workmen – altogether 42 of the 56 who participated in the structured interviews – live in the Coptic village of Deir Rifeh (fig. 7). Concerning the interviewees, 20 workmen from Deir Rifeh participated and only one from Dorunkah. In the following, I will briefly explain why the workmen come from these four villages and why the majority of them live in Deir Rifeh.

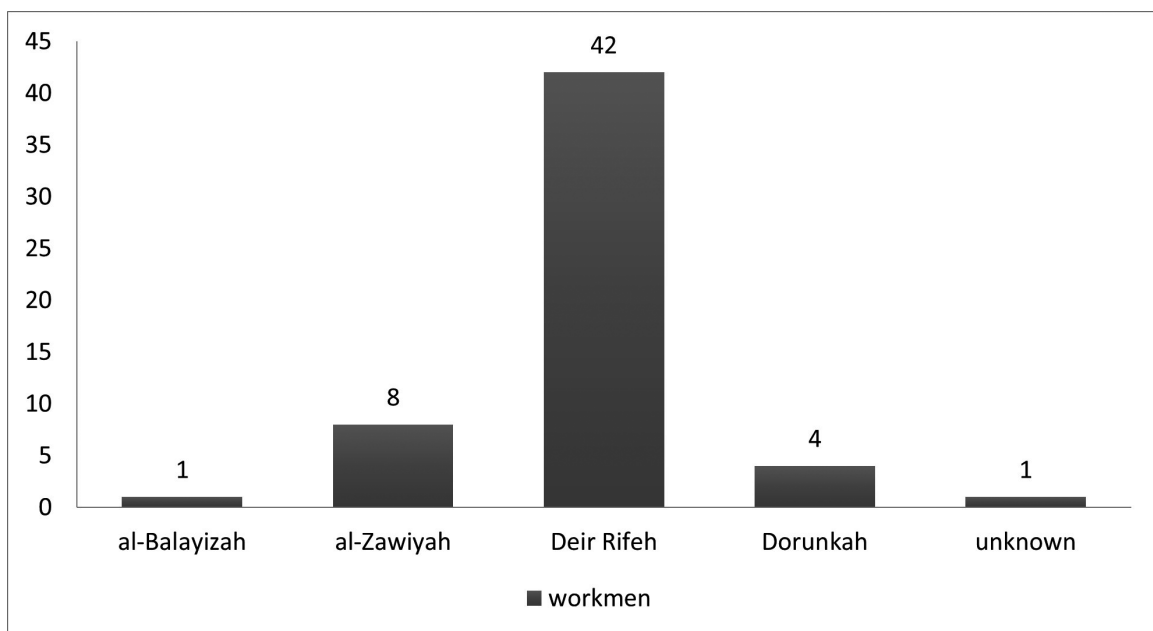


Fig. 7. The place of residence of the workmen (structured questionnaire). Image: Tina Beck.

When the Asyut Project was established and they were looking for local workmen, the local office of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities connected the Asyut Project with Akram who was at the time one of the *Ghafirs* working at the ancient necropolis at Deir Rifeh. Since he was not able to work as a *Ghafir* and for the Asyut Project at

the same time, his brother, George, was introduced to the project directors, Kahl, El-Khadragy, and Verhoeven. As George has been responsible for recruiting workmen, most of them come from his home village of Deir Rifeh. Based on this information we decided to create a family tree of George's family and found that of the 42 workmen from Deir Rifeh, only 14 are related to him. During his interview, George explained how he chose the men for the archaeological fieldwork. He focused more on each person's abilities and social situation and not on his personal relationship with them. He looked for a work group that has a balance of strength, diligence, knowledge, experience, and reliability. He also emphasised that the men he chose are used to working together as they usually worked on each other's farmland or on construction sites (Beck 2016: 41–42). The workmen from al-Balayizah, al-Zawiyah and Dorunkah, on the other hand, have familial or cordial relationships with the *Ghafirs* at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi and are Muslims. The composition of the team of workmen is thus not coincidental and involves some negotiations between George and the *Ghafirs* at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi before works starts, since only George knows the number of workmen who will be needed and the kind of work that will be done during the season. Unfortunately, it remains unknown how and when these negotiations take place as well as how the number of men coming through the *Ghafirs* is decided compared to those from Deir Rifeh. The *Qufti* Ahmed Atitou, who is in charge of supervising the workmen at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi, set up each working team together with George. The collaboration between George, the *Ghafirs* and Ahmed Atitou before the season begins ensures not only a smooth start to the fieldwork each year but also balanced and well-functioning teams.

### ***Working with the Asyut Project: The perspectives of the local workmen***

In this section, the distribution of working groups will be reflected upon with the help of the interviews, alongside the question of whether there is a hierarchy between the different positions at the site. To begin, I explain the different positions:

- a) Working within an archaeological trench: The workmen who work directly with at least two archaeologists use tools such as shovels, hoes, and trowels. In this position, the workmen and the archaeologists work side-by-side, discussing how to proceed and, as a result, uncover finds and stratigraphical information. The excavated soil is carried in baskets or pushed in wheelbarrows to the sieve by several workmen, where one workman sieves the soil and sorts out further finds.
- b) Working with the architects: One workman usually accompanies the architect to assist him or her setting up the total station and the prism.
- c) Working with the ceramicists: Up to three workmen help with sorting and washing the pottery finds.
- d) Water carriers: Three to four workmen are responsible for bringing water to the site three times a day. This water is used for drinking, cooking tea, and washing the pottery.

Earlier, the archaeologists of the Asyut Project assumed that the workmen consider working with shovels, hoes, and trowels as the most important and prestigious work, because those workmen have a greater responsibility. Interestingly, the interviews showed that the workmen did not classify the different positions in the same way as the scholars. The interviews with Antonius, Victor, and Girgis (who are all 50 years or older) showed that they are proud to work in direct contact with the scholars (Beck 2016: 35–37, 44, 45, 48). They talked in detail about their importance for the fieldwork and that they are reliable and careful. However, if a job exceeds their physical ability – for example, if their team is cleaning a deep or narrow shaft – they will do other tasks (Beck 2016: 48). The distribution of positions on site is not bound to seniority; rather, it depends on the specific conditions at the site and the abilities of each workman, including their experiences with the archaeological work and their physical conditions (Beck 2016: 46). Sometimes the workmen will ask for a different position.

Sieving the excavated soil is the second most important job in the eyes of the scholars. For the workman Magdy, it is his favourite task, since he is a student of Egyptology at the Asyut University and sieving gives him the opportunity to look at all the finds coming through the sieve. However, for some of the workmen it is the most boring job, because they are sorting the dirt and crushed stones while being quite isolated from the others. Even though

the workman Joseph has been working at the sieve to the utmost satisfaction of the archaeologists for several years, he would prefer to be employed in the archaeological trench together with his friends, whose company he enjoys and which misses while at the sieve (Beck 2016: 49–50).

Altogether, this leads to the conclusion that the different positions on site do not carry prestige that may have an effect on the social life or standing of the workmen. The concept of prestigious positions for the workmen is only thought of as such by the *Qufti*, Ahmed Atitou, and the archaeologists. Since all workmen – no matter which position they have – receive the same daily salary, there is also no need for them to hierarchise the working positions in monetary terms (Beck 2016: 49–51).

Seven statements concerning the work at the Asyut Project help to represent the various perspectives of the local workmen:

“Once the fieldwork is over, I am very upset; we are all together here, and that is the best thing about it. [...] The day I am the happiest on the Gebel here is pay day. No one carries the dirt and is only because of that happy.” (Abraam)

“It is only work, just work. It is not our business; we cannot profit from it. You can see us with the barrow. We have no benefit. You just spend your day at work. Then you go home.” (Ahmed)

“We work and that is it. I know nothing, only that they brought us work and peace. The things here I don’t know anything about, but I know that they study them to be a doctor. [...] They don’t explain us, what is the subject. They say, work, and that is it.” (Makarius)

“These people come here to find gold or small statues. [...] I know nothing about this mountain. The workmen come to earn money. The foreigners come to study. Is that correct, that they come here for research? But about what?” (Jakob)

“The disadvantage with the foreigners is that we cannot understand them, and we cannot talk to them. If the Egyptians are not with us, we know nothing.” (Nuhr)

“We are here to earn our bread. It is good that the Egyptians work with us, they know how to differentiate between right or wrong. Without the Egyptians it would not work. Like Silvia, she speaks Arabic, but sometimes we don’t understand. Prof. Dr. al-Shafay then explains these words. We do our work, and then we get up and leave.” (Victor)

“We come here foremost to eat our bread. These people come here for research and to do studies. They will profit from their knowledge. That is it. They will discover things we might not know. [...] Why is this excavation not Egyptian? Now we have found a shaft and it will help NN to become a Doctor, right? Even if you mock an Egyptian doctor more, I would prefer it if the team would be only Egyptians, because it is our property and that is how I feel.” (Rimon)

The archaeological project offers a regular income for at least six weeks from August until October every year; at that time of year, there is almost no work available in the fields (Beck 2016: 54). Therefore, the work with the Asyut Project is much welcomed. Money, prices, and daily wages were regular subjects throughout the interviews (Beck 2016: 56), and, due to the revolution and the rising prices for staple foods and rates of unemployment, it was an even more emotionally charged subject (Beck 2016: 53–55). Abraam and other workmen highlighted the positive work environment, not only with their friends and relatives from their village but also with the international scholars of the Asyut Project (Beck 2016: 55). However, Abraam’s biggest motivator or happiest day of the week is Thursday, i.e. pay day. According to Ahmed and Makarius, this kind of work has no special significance in their life. It is work, and that’s that: work to earn money to support oneself and one’s family (Beck 2016: 56–58). Jacob, for example, also states that he only comes to Gebel Asyut al-gharbi for money, whereas in his opinion the scholars come for their studies. As discussed above, the different stakeholders not only have different backgrounds but also differing interests in the site. Scholars can be less driven by money but are instead motivated by their research goals and academic careers.

It is worth stressing that some of the workmen also stated that they have no information about the site, nor do they really have an understanding of the process of archaeological fieldwork, the sorting and recording of finds, or how scholars interpret their findings (Beck 2016: 56–58). Thus, the relationship between the local workmen and the scholars of the Asyut Project is mainly a capitalistic one between employer and employee. The workmen are alienated labourers with almost no access to the results of the project. This is mainly due to the structure of the fieldwork, the hierarchy within the Egyptian society, and the language barrier between international scholars and local workmen.



Some additional differences in the jobs on site are worth mentioning. Workmen who do the digging in the trenches discuss the ongoing working process and the necessary next steps with the archaeologists, whereas the workmen who push the wheelbarrows, carry the baskets, wash the pottery, and carry the water up the mountain are not included in these discussions. It is therefore not surprising that they state that they do not feel included or informed, and that, apart from the daily wage, they do not benefit from this work. This systematic alienation leads to rumours about the archaeological fieldwork. Jacob's interview, for example, shows that he has no idea why the archaeologists work at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi. He stated that archaeologists are only looking for statues or gold. It is assumptions or rumours like this that eventually attract tomb robbers (Beck 2016: 60). Jacob goes on to ask why the archaeologists come to Asyut and work on this site. Obviously, being interested in the archaeological site or having questions about the working techniques and methods not only concerns those workmen who dig or work at the sieve. In addition, the interviews showed that there is a notable social distance between the local workmen and the team of scholars – foreign and Egyptian alike. This distance is part of Egyptian society and becomes apparent through, for example, the lack of communication and information exchanged during fieldwork (Beck 2016: 69, 76). Also, the social distance is further manifested by the language barrier. Most of the workmen have no knowledge of English, and the Arabic language skills of the international scholars are in most cases not sufficient for them to explain the results and the monuments at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi in the context of ancient Egyptian history. Nuhr and Victor rightfully point out that the work with non-Arabic-speaking archaeologists is difficult and that they only understand what they are doing when the Egyptian scholars at the site translate. Lastly, the statement by Rimón reflects the issues associated with the difference in motivation between the workmen and the scholars, the alienation of labour and, interestingly, also the form of the research project as an Egyptian-German cooperation. He clearly states that he would prefer if only Egyptians did research on ancient Egyptian sites, although it remains unclear why he thinks that, since he does not elaborate further on this subject (Beck 2016: 60).

With the interviews in 2011, the scholars and workmen gained some understanding of each other's interests and opinions. At the end of the fieldwork, Ammar Abu Bakr and Kahl held a talk for all the workmen, summarising the research goals and methods of the project and giving a brief overview of the history of the ancient necropolis.

What has changed since then? Regular briefings for the workmen interested in the archaeological fieldwork are now held, and the archaeologists take more time explaining the working methods and results to their whole team instead of focussing only on those working directly with them. Unfortunately, the Asyut Project has, until now, been unable to implement other forms of community engagement with the population of Asyut or the local workmen. This is largely due to the circumstances that come with working in Asyut and on the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi. As mentioned above, the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi is military territory. One is only allowed to visit the ancient sites on the mountain with military security, and therefore the Gebel Asyut al-gharbi is neither open to (inter)national tourists nor to the population of Asyut. Another peculiarity is that the scholars of the Asyut Project are always accompanied by the local police, which means that meetings with people outside the project are neither easy nor supported by the local authorities. Before 2011, the foreigners occasionally visited the workmen – mainly in Deir Rifeh. Such occasions would usually include seeing the sights of the ancient necropolis there as well as a stopover at their church in the village. After the interviews took place, the visits to Deir Rifeh have become an integral part of the fieldwork in Asyut and constitute an important event for the foreigners and some of the workmen alike. These visits must be coordinated with the local police who always attend the meetings, while also being responsible for the protection of the foreigners. I have also witnessed a noticeable change in the work dynamic between the scholars and the workmen in the years following the interviews. More explanations are offered to everyone who is interested in order to overcome the alienation of labour; the foreign scholars try harder to learn Arabic; and, with the newly gained insight into the living conditions of the workmen, a better mutual understanding has been obtained, which makes working together easier and more comfortable for all of the different groups, as was confirmed to me by two workmen who participated in the interviews. Also, the workmen realised that if they ask about the finds and research methods, the scholars are happy to answer those questions. Although this was already the case before this study, the interviews showed that the answers given by the scholars were often short and caused more confusion than clarification (Beck 2016: 83).

The Asyut Project has produced several publications in Arabic. In 2018, the first book of the Asyut Project, which is also dedicated to 'the people of Asyut past and present' (Kahl 2007), was translated by Mohamed Abdelrahim and published by Sohag University. With this, the Asyut Project wanted to offer not only an Arabic publication on their research but also one that is affordable for Egyptian Egyptologists. The book was presented during the

fieldwork at Gebel Asyut al-gharbi in 2018, but only a handful of workmen took one of the free books provided by the project. This might not be a result of a lack of interest, but rather based on the ability to read and/or to read a scientific book. Consequently, Kahl and I plan to continue working closely with the local workmen and focus more on their needs and expectations concerning the exchange of knowledge about the site, the fieldwork and the research results of the Asyut Project.

## Conclusion

In this paper, community engagement was introduced as a promising way not only to further decolonise Egyptology, and especially the archaeological work in Egypt, but also to broaden the horizon of scholars by including other voices, methods, and interpretations in their research. A postcolonial Egyptology is an important ideal that has not yet been reached (if it ever will be). But, if Egyptologists start to create an awareness and declare communication to be an asset of archaeological fieldwork and not a hindrance, Egyptology will eventually get closer to this goal, leaving neocolonialism and coloniality behind or at least the worst excesses thereof. The interviews with the local workmen in Asyut showed that the scholars of the Asyut Project are not the only ones interested in the site. Some of the local workmen showed an eagerness to learn more about Gebel Asyut al-gharbi. The local workmen and the foreign scholars have been working with each other for years. Their relationship has been characterised as a mainly monetary one between employer and employee that is marked by social distance between the two groups as well as the alienation of labour and a profound language barrier with non-Arabic-speaking scholars. Today, this relationship might not be as distanced as it used to be, and the foreign scholars try to address interests and questions coming from the local workmen. Nonetheless, there is still a long way to go.

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