

Jochem Kahl

Ancient Asyut
The First Synthesis
after 300 Years of Research

2007

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PREFACE

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Jochem Kahl

INTRODUCTION

WHY WRITE A BOOK ABOUT ANCIENT ASYUT?

In pharaonic times Asyut never played a central role in the ancient state. It was never the capital of the splendid empire of those kings who made history for nearly three thousand years from 3200-332 BC.

Asyut was often an important support for the royal court, but sometimes even the opposite. It seems always to have had its own and original creative power. Sometimes in accordance with the canon of the royal court, but more often by seeking and developing its own concepts of art, architecture, and religious beliefs, ancient Asyut as far as modern researches concern is today well known for its own school, a school of craftsmanship and theology, which produced many unique pieces of art and texts, which were highly valued in ancient times and that also have today a permanent place in the scientific discipline of Egyptology.

Not only did Asyut have a relatively distant position with respect to the high culture of the court, but it also provided important impulses to the court and other towns. Often it is mentioned in religious texts as being one of the most important towns in Middle and Upper Egypt. This special role of Asyut, i.e. its position between residential influence and regional traditions, deserves to be examined as an example for high culture outside the royal court.

Due to a poor history of research and the deprivation of many of its monuments, Asyut had been forgotten for a long time. Only some of its most beautiful objects, today found in museums and collections all over the world, receive any attention at all. The ancient site, its town, its temples, and its necropolis had not been the focus of any interest since the 1920s. In the 1980s and the beginning 1990s some attempts to start scientific work in Asyut failed due to the danger of terrorism. Only in 2003 a new field-project began: The Asyut Project. A joint mission of the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster (Germany) and of the University of Sohag (Egypt) surveyed the ancient necropolis, and in 2004 members of these Universities, as well as members of the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz (Germany), conducted the first archaeological fieldwork there in more than eighty years. According to modern understanding of archaeology, the goals of this fieldwork are not the discovery of single objects, but the reconstruction of the history of the ancient necropolis, and thereby of the ancient town and its different fortunes as a city of culture, as a border town, and as a wounded city, as well as the determination of various phases and functions concerning the use of the western mountain at Asyut. Goals are also safeguarding and restoring ancient monuments in the necropolis, which have suffered much through stone quarrying, tomb robberies, and climatic influences.

This book is intended to contribute to establishing ancient Asyut's place in the memory of modern mankind. It will provide an overview on our present knowledge about the history, the art, and the people of ancient Asyut—an overview, which will hopefully be enlarged by further studies and ongoing fieldwork activities in the near future.