

# The Chicago Medieval Luxor Project

Donald Whitcomb and Janet Johnson

**T**he purpose of the excavations was an examination of the urban history of Luxor.

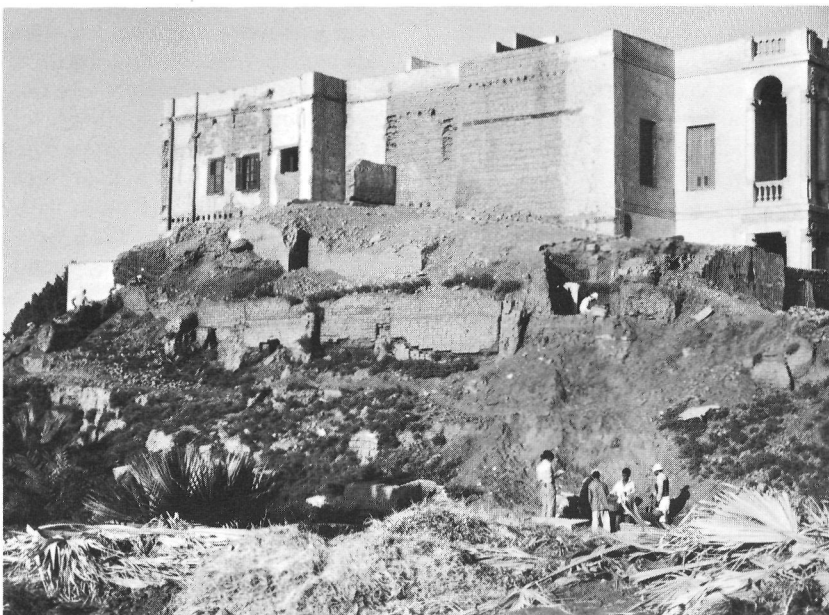
The superposition of periods in Luxor was clear to archaeologists until very recent years; it is still illustrated in the first court of the temple, where the walls of a 6th century church are built into a corner of the colonnaded Ramesside court (built ca. 1250 B.C.). Above the church is the 13th century shrine of Sheikh Abu'l Haggag, the patron "saint" of Luxor. From 1881 until 1960, the temple was cleared and the Avenue of the Sphinxes uncovered. This work involved the destruction of the center of the traditional city of Luxor, a mound of



some 15 meters of archaeological evidence for the history of Luxor after the Pharaohs.

The one area of the old town which still preserves this archaeological record is the embankment behind the house of Yasa Andraus Pasha, near the river. While no archaeological materials can be expected under the house, the embankment behind it contains a full archaeological sequence. In December, 1985, we placed two narrow trenches in this mound at either end of the house. This excavation was approved by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization and facilitated by Mr. Mohammad Sugheir and two inspectors, Mr. Magdi al-

*The embankment below the house of Andraus Pasha, the last remnant of medieval Luxor. Trench B-C is to the right and trench A-D is on the left edge of the mound.*



Mullah and Mr. Abd al-Gawad Haggagi. The staff consisted of the writers, Lisa Heidorn, Beth Mosher, John Meloy, Ann M. Roth, and Robert Schick, all current students or recent graduates of the OI. We lived at Chicago House and benefited greatly from the assistance and expertise of Lanny Bell and all his staff.

One trench (A-D) was oriented north-south with a total length of 16 meters and a width of 2 meters. From the highest to the lowest point was about 8 meters. The upper portion consisted of a peak of fibrous material which dated from the 9th to 12th century. Beneath this was silt associated with walls which seem to be transitional Coptic to Islamic with artifacts of the 7th–8th centuries. The massive and well-preserved wall G separated two areas; on the west were a series of thin layers of ash and silt which will provide an important sequence of Coptic ceramics. These layers were cut by the previous excavations and covered with modern debris, shown on the section drawing as stippled areas.

Wall G was the first wall encountered of a large building complex which filled the lower part of this trench. Most of this building was covered by a layer of red burnt material. The northernmost room had a floor with pots broken *in situ* and a small partition wall. These vessels may belong to the 5th or 6th centuries. Beneath this floor was a solid mass of brick and the base of a large pot (shown on the top plan). One wall of the next room had a course of baked brick at the top leading to

a pot base embedded in the wall, possibly the remnant of an internal drain. The materials associated with the earliest architectural phase appear to be late Ptolemaic or early Roman. Rooms further to the south were associated with wall A, which had a brick bin built against its west face. Five whole vessels were found in this bin and several more on the floor outside of the bin. These ceramics appear to be Coptic of the 3rd or 4th centuries.

This building complex is no doubt associated with the extensive buildings visible between this trench and the temple. It is thus possible to suggest that these excavated remains should be datable to the late Roman or early Coptic period. The early Islamic walls would seem to be a portion of the large building visible in the embankment between trenches A and B. The exposed walls indicate a large building divided into numerous rooms and preserved to over 3 meters in height. This building had two stories, with the lower composed of vaulted rooms, and is now in the process of collapsing.

The second trench (B-C), oriented east-west, was also 2 meters wide and 18.5 meters long. Its total height was about 9 meters and the lowest point was just below the level of the Avenue of the Sphinxes. The uppermost layer had a floor into which was embedded a cloth with 3 copper coins, all dated 1917. Several stone wall foundations, found in these Islamic levels and in those of trench A, incorporated stones from Luxor temple. The fragments of hieroglyphic inscriptions and scenes are being studied by Raymond Johnson of the Chicago Epigraphic Survey as part of his recon-



*Trench A-D at the beginning of the excavations.*

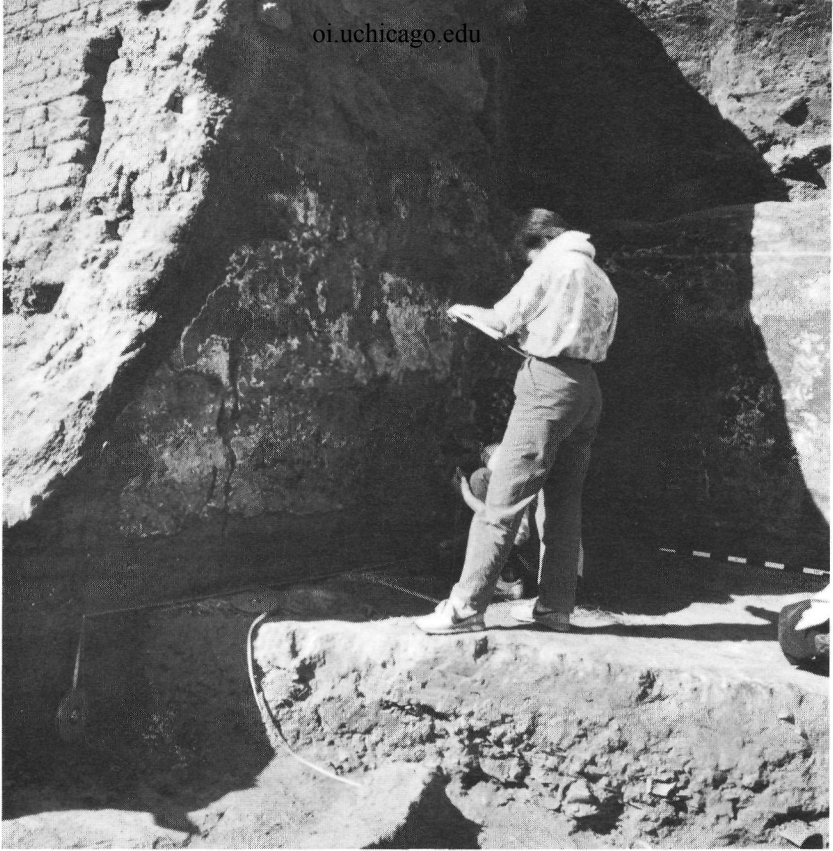
structions of scenes within the temple.

Beneath this floor were layers of fibrous and dark organic material containing ceramics of the 12th and 13th centuries. These included glazed ceramics, punctate decorated cream wares, and unglazed painted wares. This last category is typically Nubian and was probably produced in Aswan. These ceramics lie above a layer of artifacts of the 9th and 10th centuries, which extends down to a finely laid baked brick floor. This floor had a roof beam and roofing material fallen upon it and was set onto a fill of water-worn materials.

The central portion of this trench was a massive amount of brick fall from a very large building. This debris was removed revealing a large room, the two well-preserved walls of which were decorated with wall paintings

(called frescoes, but actually only a thin painted lime plaster on mud brick). These frescoes were some 2 meters in height and generally poorly preserved, depicting a simple series of rectangular panels in alternating colors (dark red, orange, yellow with red splashes, and dark green with black splashes). No attempt at more elaborate geometric or figural decoration was made on the walls of this room. A preservative coating was placed on these frescoes. Within the fallen brick debris of the room was a finely carved head of Thutmosis III, made of shist and about half life-size. All the other materials from the room debris date to the 5th or 6th centuries.

Ironically no indication of a plastered floor was found, and the floor must have been simple dirt. Below this was a layer of burnt debris and ash associated with two ovens. Similar ovens have been found at Karnak, where they were apparently



Ann Roth recording the "frescoed" walls in trench B.

used for baking bread used in the temple. These ovens were sunk into a concentration of typically Roman sherds.

The lower end of this trench has several superimposed building levels, all of which seem to belong to the Late Period (26th to 30th Dynasties). Due to the very damp soil conditions, walls were progressively difficult to define as the trench proceeded lower. The walls seem to have been built in pairs. Below the level of these walls, at the eastern end of the trench, was a set of 3 circular ovens and protecting walls. The ovens contained very little ash and only sherds of this period. The walls found in this trench are at the same level and orientation as the numerous excavated walls in the deep depression south of this trench.

It is therefore probable that many of these walls should also be dated to the Late Period.

The value of these controlled excavations lies in the large corpus of materials from stratified contexts. Further study of the artifacts, presently stored in the magazines of Luxor temple, will be necessary to refine the chronological and cultural periods proposed in this report. This preliminary analysis has identified the main periods, the Late Period, Roman, early and late Coptic, early and middle Islamic. Certainly more precise definition will be possible and, in this way, these relatively small trenches may make a major contribution toward the archaeological history of the town of Luxor.