

THE LUXOR–FARSHÛT DESERT ROAD SURVEY

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Between the Upper Egyptian towns of er-Rizeiqat and Farshût, the Nile River describes a dramatic curve to the northeast, the Qena Bend (see fig. 1; and map, fig. 2). Several desert tracks cut across the portion of the limestone plateau that fills this curve. One of the more prominent of these paths is the road from Luxor to Farshût, which begins near ancient quarries in the Theban hills and reaches the height of the desert plateau between the peaks of the Qurn and the “Thoth Mountain,” at a point overlooking the so-called “Valley of the Guardian Khay.” Various other tracks beginning to the north and south of the main Theban terminus join this central route before it reenters the Nile Valley at a pass in Gebel Qarn el-Gir through the Wadi el-Hôl; from there, it continues on to Farshût, an important junction of several desert routes, including a major track connecting Kharga Oasis with the Nile Valley. Abundant remains of human activity, dating from modern times back to the Paleolithic period, are visible on the surface at the Luxor end of the road, but until now the only published references to any of these remains were the brief notes, “stone piles” and “Paleolithic work places,” on the 1909 Schweinfurth Map of western Thebes. In the 1930s, the Mond expedition examined parts of the Armant to the Nag^c Hammadi branch of this track for prehistoric



Figure 1. The road to Farshût begins near the ancient limestone quarries in the northern fork of the Wadyein (partially visible far right, behind white car). Modern quarrying continues nearby, not far from the “watchtower” (left center) and its surrounding area, which is covered with ancient quarry chippings and numerous potsherds

remains, but the material is as yet unpublished. Except for the stela of Sobekhotep III located near the northern end of the road, the pharaonic history of this desert track has never been discussed.

During the past several years, as epigraphers with the Epigraphic Survey, we have explored many of the ancient roads of the Thebaid, walking for miles along the bright ribbons of limestone, alternately polished or turned to powder by the footsteps of travelers over the millennia. We have noted numerous sites on and near these paths that merit intensive study. We decided to begin our formal work with the main Luxor–Farshût Road, specifically, the tongue of land overlooking western Thebes at which point the path scaling the side of the gebel becomes a track across the high desert. This site was chosen because of our prior discovery of the fragments of a sandstone stela, dressed sandstone blocks, and associated pottery in this location (see below). Our goals were to identify the spatial and temporal distribution of activity areas by surveying the surface remains and mapping all archaeological features.

Stone cairns and huts of various sizes are clustered in several more or less discrete areas of the site (fig. 3). In order to obtain as complete a picture as possible of the nature and scope of activities in the area over time, all of these features were mapped; their sizes range from 50 cm to over 9 m in diameter. Bits of sandstone and pottery incorporated within the large piles in the northeastern sector of the area indicate that these are of post-pharaonic date. Surface remains in association with some of the other groups of cairns and huts point to a much earlier date for original construction, perhaps in several stages. The only other structure still *in situ* is at the very tip of the plateau, where the road makes the final ascent to the level of the high desert. There, partially excavated into the limestone, are the tumbled remains of a tower with a clavicular entrance, suggesting the presence of Roman desert police. This particular spot, from which it is possible to look down into the Western Valley and the Valley of the Kings, is a superb vantage point for supervising traffic in and out of the surrounding wadis and may have been recognized as such in pharaonic times as well. In fact, some of the huts may be vestiges of the police posts to the north of the Valley of the Kings described in a Ramesside reference to the “northern walls of the place of Pharaoh, l.p.h.”

Sandstone fragments in various stages of decomposition, many of them identifiable as both roughly smoothed and well-finished blocks, are scattered over the eastern portion of the site, the greatest concentration lying in and around a pit of

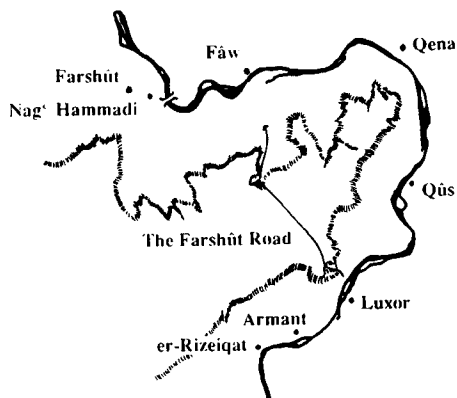


Figure 2. Map of the Gena Bend of the Nile, Upper Egypt (adapted from *Rock Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt I*, by Hans A. Winkler, Sir Robert Mond Desert Expedition, Season 1936-1937 [London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1938], map based on the Survey of Egypt 1:100,000 map)



Figure 3. View of cairns in the southwestern sector; cairns I and XV in foreground

about 1.8×3.6 m cut into the limestone just to the south of the road. These are the remains of a previously unknown temple. For the dating of the structure, the most important find is a portion of a sandstone doorjamb bearing the cartouches of Antef (V?) and Sobekemsaf (I?) of the Seventeenth Dynasty (fig. 4). Of possible readings, the most likely, as we will fully explain in our forthcoming preliminary report, is:

“[... renewal of the monument for his father (?), the Son of Re^c]
Antef, which the Son of Re^c Sobekem[saf] has made [...]”

One might be tempted to take the *ir.n* as an indication of filiation, reading *‘‘Antef son of [lit. ‘made by’] Sobekemsaf,’’ but contemporary parallels and the implicit theology make this unlikely. We have found several other fragments of this doorway; some hieroglyphs are still detectable on the very worn surface of a piece that preserves traces of plaster. There are a few fragmentary unfired bricks on the plateau, suggesting that the temple may have been built partially of mudbrick, like the Eleventh Dynasty mudbrick, limestone, and sandstone temple of Se^cankhkare Monthuhotep atop the northernmost promontory of the Theban gebel, a highpoint resembling a free-standing mountain from the front (east), known colloquially as ‘‘Thoth Mountain.’’ That structure, once considered odd because of its unusual location in a ‘‘high place’’ in Thebes, is no longer unique because we now know that a sandstone temple stood atop the gebel at the beginning of the New Kingdom, overlooking what would become the Valley of the Kings. These two chapels should be considered in terms of their relationship with the roads of the Qena Bend. Seen in this light, the ‘‘mountaintop’’ location of the temples, so uncommon to ancient Egyptian sacred places, is quite understandable. They offered a place of prayer for travelers leaving the Nile Valley for the barren desert beyond, and a place of thanksgiving for a safe journey. In fact, the return to the valley must have been heralded by the first sighting of one or both of these shrines;

even today, the “Thoth Mountain” temple is visible when one is still hours out in the desert on the Farshût Road.

Other inscribed remains include several fragments of a badly eroded and smashed stela, the corner of a small naos, and the bottom half of a statue. The sandstone stela has depictions of “Amun of Luxor” and “Mut, Mistress of the gods” in the lunette and several lines of hieroglyphic text. The lower left front corner of a small naos is the only limestone artifact thus far discovered. On its exterior are the feet of a man facing the back of the naos; on its front is the bottom of a column of text mentioning “*3h* power (in heaven), *wsr* power (on earth), justification (in the Netherworld), and the sweet breath of life,” elements not uncommon to offering formulae. Unfortunately, there is no indication of the deity to whom the naos was set up. The sandstone statue has provided a tantalizing clue concerning one of the important functions of the road. The portion preserved shows the legs and one arm of a kneeling man, with a very damaged inscription carved down the center of his lap. Although his name is all but totally destroyed, his first title, *s3-nsw.t n [hq3] nb.t*, “king’s son of the victorious [ruler],” attested on three other monuments of the Second Intermediate Period (one now stored in the Oriental Institute Museum), indicates that he was probably a mili-

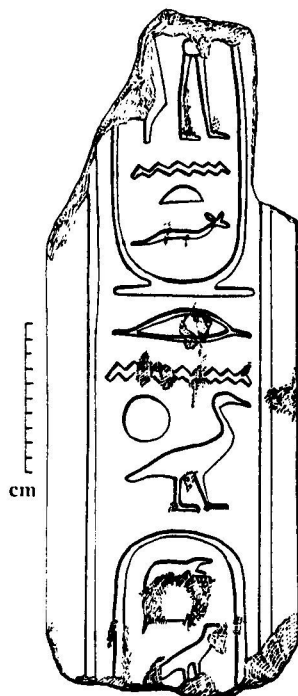


Figure 4. Fragment of sandstone doorjamb from the newly discovered Seventeenth Dynasty temple on the Farshût Road (photograph and preliminary drawing)

tary officer. The presence of a memorial to a Second Intermediate Period military leader at the Theban terminus of the road accords well with what is known to have been located at the other end of the route during that turbulent period. Considering the presence of large Theban forces at Abydos during the Second Intermediate Period, and of fortresses and palaces at Denderah and Ballas at the beginning of the New Kingdom, the military importance of the routes connecting Thebes with the northern part of the Qena Bend is clear. During this intermediate period, the Theban state was hemmed between the Asiatic dominated Delta of the increasingly Egyptianized Hyksos rulers and the powerful Kerman rulers in Nubia. The presence of a free-standing Theban temple of the Second Intermediate Period (perhaps the only such original and not usurped structure of the period known to date) on the gebel at the end of the road was a powerful statement of the Theban rulers' intention to control the desert tracks and to prevent the coordinated operations of their southern and northern foes. As the Second Stela of Kamose relates, control of the Western Desert was considered critical during the Thebans' advance into the Hyksos-controlled Delta, and this strategy was ultimately successful.

When these monuments were destroyed is uncertain, but there are indications that they stood for some time. The heavily eroded bottom portion of the stela, compared to the fairly well-preserved remnants of the lunette at the top, suggests that the stela stood for some time and was eroded by the desert's blasting sands swirling around its base before being toppled. Portions of the large pieces of sandstone, apparently belonging to the chapel, bear graffiti and the so-called "medicine gouges," further indications of a long veneration of the chapel.

Following the road up from the quarries we found a group of hieroglyphic graffiti, with a few hieratic numbers carved nearby, perhaps a tally of some elements of a work crew or caravan moving along the road. Most of the graffiti are signs and symbols of religious significance; if not references to scenes once extant on the chapel, they may indicate the presence of a priest or artisan on his way to the small chapel at the top of the escarpment.

The ceramic evidence at the site consists of widely spaced surface scatters as well as a number of dense deposits. Controlled surface collection was undertaken according to a stratified random sampling design. The quantity and diversity of material analyzed attest to a broad range of activities across various time periods. The late Second Intermediate Period to early Eighteenth Dynasty is particularly well represented. Some hand-finished jar fragments may date as early as the Middle Kingdom, but sherds from a number of large, marl storage jars of the Second Intermediate Period are the earliest securely dated pieces examined thus far (see fig. 5c). Most of these were recovered from a relatively circumscribed locus, which may represent a provision dump for a desert patrol of the period. Pan Grave potsherds were also found in this area; most likely dating from the same period, these sherds suggest the presence of the nomadic Nubian people who served the Thebans as desert policemen during the time of their wars with the Hyksos. This accords well with A. E. P. Weigall's observation that Pan Grave remains in Upper Egypt tend to be found "at strategically important military posts."

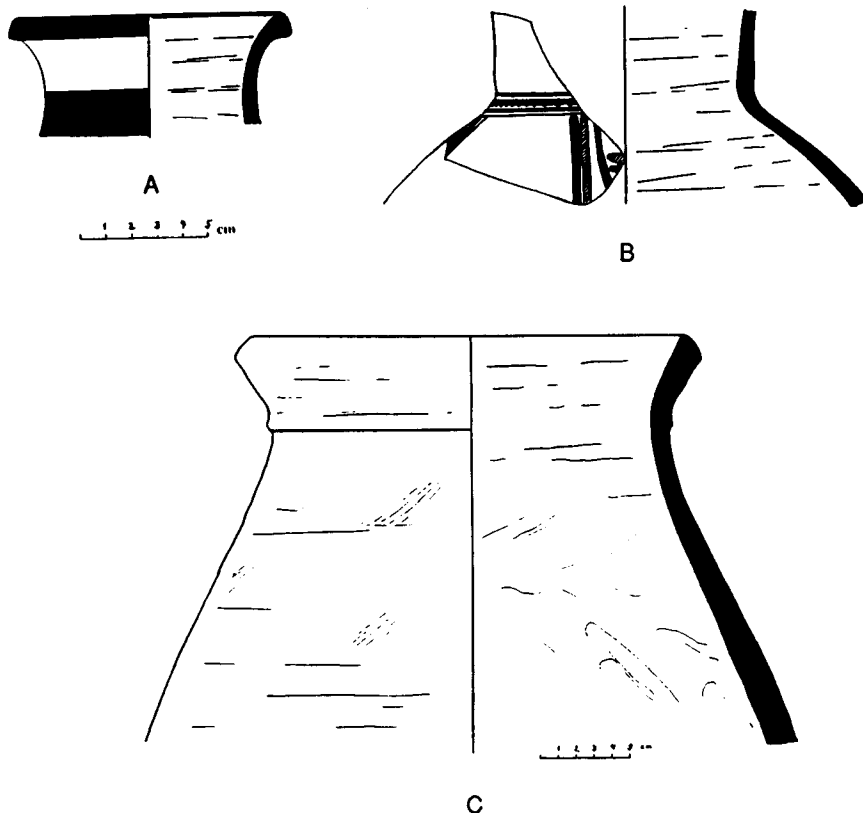


Figure 5. Examples of Second Intermediate Period–early Eighteenth Dynasty ceramics: (a) rim of Nile silt, red-slipped with black paint; (b) neck and shoulder of marl jar, red and black painted decoration; (c) fragment of marl storage jar with wheel-made rim, hand-finished body

A large volume of red and black painted wares, some of fine, polished marl clay, jars with incised bands on the neck, as well as hand-smoothed jar bottoms and bottoms of very rough beer jars date from the late Second Intermediate Period to early Eighteenth Dynasty (see fig. 5a, b). A small number of late Eighteenth Dynasty blue painted sherds have been found. We have also identified a full range of post-New Kingdom material, including fine, slender-necked bottles of the Twenty-first to Twenty-second Dynasties; disc-based votive vessels from between the Twenty-fifth Dynasty and the Ptolemaic period; Ptolemaic sherds from painted jars, amphorae, and even a handle from an imitation Hellenistic *kantharos* (drinking cup); thin, brittle, ribbed ware from the Roman period; Coptic heavy ribbed amphorae, painted wares, and a single sherd from a lead-glazed bowl; and several interesting Islamic pieces, such as a cream ware filter neck with fine incised decoration and fragments of small clay pipes.

Fragments of vessels produced outside of the local area include Nile Delta and oasis wares, as well as Cypriote, Palestinian, and Phoenician imports. The presence of a considerable amount of oasis ware, much in the form of pilgrim



Figure 6. Transporting a portion of the inscribed doorjamb and the remains of the statue of the “king’s son of the victorious ruler,” Chicago House laddermen and long-time employees Abu’l Qasem and Ali take great care in guarding the donkey and his load on the precipitous descent, while Debbie Darnell looks on. Because of the extreme vulnerability of the site, all potentially portable inscribed pieces were pinpointed, photographed in situ, and then removed to the safety of an Egyptian Antiquities Organization magazine, where they continue to be studied, drawn, and collated

flasks dating from the Twenty-fifth to Twenty-sixth Dynasties, complements the textual evidence for the existence of a road from Thebes to the oases—probably the Farshût Road—that was in use at least as early as the beginning of the Middle Kingdom.

The work of the first season has shown that the Luxor–Farshût Road was regularly traveled during the pharaonic period, beginning at least as early as the Second Intermediate Period, and that a chapel of the Seventeenth Dynasty, built at least partially of sandstone, stood at the Luxor end of the road. This chapel was apparently large enough to receive several votive objects (the small limestone naos and the seated statue). The doorjamb, the statue, and the presence of many firmly datable vessel fragments of both fine and utility wares indicate heavy use of the road and shrine during the Second Intermediate Period and the early Eighteenth Dynasty. A fragmentary stela, possibly Ramesside in date, and the wide array of pottery types that represent succeeding periods, indicate that the site retained a certain importance until the Roman period, at which time much of the desert traffic in and out of the Thebaid appears to have preferred other routes to the south. The evidence from subsequent periods, both from the main Luxor–Farshût Road and from neighboring tracks, is critical to a complete understanding of the historical development of the use of caravan routes in the region. We are also investigating these related roads and will discuss them as sources of parallel material. As our survey encompasses all of the road, we have identified further

sites, including what appear to be late Eighteenth Dynasty shrines, which we will map and study in forthcoming seasons. Our initial explorations of the ancient tracks connecting Thebes with the Darb el-Arba'in Desert and points beyond indicate that continued investigation of this area will provide important information on the desert roads of the Thebaid and on ancient Egyptian desert commerce and military activity in general.

During the preliminary stages of our work on the ancient roads of the Darb el-Arba'in Desert, the staff of the Luxor-Farshût Desert Road Survey has been restricted to the authors. We would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Peter Dorman, Assistant Professor at the University of Chicago and Field Director of the Epigraphic Survey, for his kind sponsorship of our project. The representative of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization for the season was Mr. Mahmoud Mohammed Ibrahim. We thank Dr. Mohammed Bakr, Chairman of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization, and Dr. Mutawa Balboush, Supervisor of Antiquities for Upper Egypt, for their support. We would like to thank Dr. Mohammed es-Saghir, Director of Antiquities for Southern Upper Egypt, for the interest he has shown in this project from its inception; we thank Dr. Sayed el-Hegazy, Chief Inspector of Qurna, and Inspectors Mahmoud Mohammed Ibrahim and Nasr Swelim for their support and assistance. Helen and Jean Jacquet of the Karnak-Nord Expedition have offered much advice; we would like to extend special thanks to Mme. Jacquet-Gordon for her invaluable help with ceramic analysis. We have received enthusiastic encouragement and guidance for which we are very grateful from Dr. Henri Riad and Dr. Azouz Sadek. We thank Susan Lezon and Tom Van Eynde for their photographic expertise; the artistic skills of Tina DiCerbo and Susan Osgood are much appreciated. Thanks are due to the following individuals who have helped us at various stages of the project: Dr. Lisa Heidorn, Dr. Colin Hope, Amira Khattab, Ibrahim Sadek, John Sanders, Joel Sweek, and Dr. Donald Whitcomb.
