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A Different Kind of Digging: Social Anthropology as Archaeological Fieldwork Practice

Kees van der Spek

Abstract

Using the Noble Tombs of the Theban necropolis as its starting point, but with obvious implications for other archaeological sites where there is a close relationship with resident local communities, this paper calls for archaeological research in Egypt to concern itself with the entire stratigraphy of a site, including the most recent sequence with its contemporary deposits. The paper argues for the inclusion of social and cultural anthropological observation in the research methodologies of archaeologists excavating in locations where nearby contemporary communities represent continuities in the stratigraphic sequence of the excavation concession.

The End of Stratigraphy

Between 2006 and 2010 the foothill hamlets of al-Qurna village in the Theban necropolis on the Luxor west bank were demolished (Figures 1–2), and its resident community of Qurnawi was relocated to new settlements (Figure 3).[1] The yellow, white, and blue walls of the mud-brick houses—several of which were of historical value in their own right[2] or had been decorated with *hajj* paintings celebrating the pilgrimage to Mecca[3]—had disintegrated into piles of rubble. With it, the sounds that once typified the social landscape of the necropolis familiar to visitors and members of the archaeological missions working there, have gone for good. No longer will visitors to the Noble Tombs be charmed by the sounds of Qurnawi children playing, laughing, crying. Gone is the regular call to prayer from the small mosque by the roadside below the tomb of Ramose, as is the bouncing clatter of the empty oil barrel dancing in the metal frame of the *arabiyya* water cart, racing downhill behind its galloping donkey. Gone from the foothills too is the metallic ring of the *butagaz* merchant signaling his approach by hitting the blue gas cylinders at regular intervals with the adjustable spanner that is the tool of his trade. Depending on proximity and ranging from a distant sistra-like chime to an ear-splitting clangor, the sound served a commercial purpose that, like the water cart, formed part of the constraints of daily life imposed on the Qurnawi villagers for whom this archaeological landscape was home. The *arabiyya* of the necropolis and the call of the itinerant gas merchant may be seen as metaphors for the inherent tension that exists when a contemporary community inhabits a fragile and unique World Heritage-listed archaeological landscape. Following a history of relocation initiatives that dates back to the mid-1940s,[4] that tension ultimately resulted in the demolition of the hamlets around the Noble Tombs and the destruction of the contemporary social landscape of the Theban necropolis on the Luxor west bank.

The demolitions wrought by the bulldozers between 2006 and 2010 not only compromised the existing stratigraphy but also put an end to any further depositions associated with the Qurnawi occupation sequence. Although the situation in Egypt will not be exceptional, for locally working field archaeologists, interest in the superimposing stratigraphy may already have ended at the point where the ancient occupation layer of their own research interest commenced. Despite community life creating the visible and audible backdrop to Egyptological research activities in the necropolis for so many years (Figure 4), the surrounding social landscape of the necropolis apparently held no special scientific interest for archaeologists working there. Several of a foreign mission's local workers will have come from the foothills hamlets, or a degree of amicable relations may have been established with villagers living adjacent to the excavation concession. But archaeologists' engagement with the local community will have largely resulted from necessity. Other than the logistical arrangements that go with the practice of conducting archeological field operations, including local labor relations, Egyptologists in the main do not focus intellectually on the present and their engagement remains with the excavation, the surrounding monuments, and the



Figure 1: A formerly familiar view from the roadside as seen by tourists passing on their way to the Valley of the Kings: Qurnawi houses at the foot of the hill of Shaykh Abd al-Qurna with the Theban Mountain, the Qurn, in the background. The white house with the "romanesque" gate was built by the brothers Abd al-Rasul around 1880. Photograph by the author.



Figure 2: The location seen in Figure 1 as it appeared in 2009, after relocation and demolition, including the Abd al-Rasul house and any remaining vernacular "furniture" (see Figure 10). Much of this destroyed cultural landscape would have been deserving of heritage status in its own right. Photograph by the author.



Figure 3: Houses in Qurna al-Gedīda, one of the three new settlements to which Qurnawi were relocated, as a result of which the previously existing social structure of the community became effectively fragmented. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4: The Saturday and Tuesday morning market at al-Tāref, with the Theban Mountain in the background. Photograph by the author.

past. Social anthropologists they are not, and the demarcation between the excavating archaeologists and those who conduct anthropological fieldwork is therefore what can be expected, with each directing their attention to what occupies them most, the past and the present respectively. But in reality, this also means that not modern earthmoving equipment but rather the archaeologists themselves place constraints on the local stratigraphic sequence and decide where for them in practical terms the present would end and the past commence. This paper proposes that a more prominent place be afforded to the modern stratigraphy in the published record of archaeological excavations in Egypt, with the gathering of ethnographic data by a social anthropologist to be included in the research design of foreign archaeological missions working in Egypt.

Early Antiquarian Interests and Its Ethnographic Practice

Elements of social and cultural anthropological engagement can be found in the literature dealing with the Luxor west bank going back to early European visitor presence and the earliest days of Egyptological activity in the Theban necropolis and even earlier (Figures 5–6). It can hardly be otherwise in an environment where a local community resides in the midst of ancient monuments, whose members used the tomb chambers of the necropolis as dwelling places, and who interacted with visitors in their dealings over antiquities. Snippets of this interaction and the record of their associated impressions are found in the writings of such early travelers in Egypt as the Anonymous Venetian,[5] James Bruce,[6] Charles Sonnini,[7] Vivant Denon,[8] and Robert Richardson,[9] among others. Drawn there by the appeal of Egypt's ancient monuments or as a result of Europe's growing antiquarian interests, references to local people and places contemporaneous with these travelers intermittently infuse their manuscript diaries and published travel narratives. To the extent that these documents and their archival study form part of historical anthropological analysis,[10] the scattered detail of people living among the monuments documented by them can be accepted as essentially one of ethnographic observation, which can therefore be said to have existed alongside Egyptology and its evolving archaeological practice in the Theban necropolis from the very beginning.

This is not to say that such accounts of the surrounding social landscape were necessarily always correct. Elsewhere it has been argued how early western accounts were infected by anti-social attributes commonly ascribed to Qurnawi.[11] These attributes often did not result from direct personal experience on the part of European travelers, but were influenced by boat owners or local officials whose views may have reflected some personal locally held bias or the hegemonic perspective of the governing elite. Even if such local views were grounded in the particular social and political structures of the time, these were either accepted at face value or not fully understood by early travelers. The result of the negative light in which the villagers of the Luxor west bank were continually and consistently portrayed by these local informants, influenced both the mindset of the visiting Europeans and the records they kept.

It is likely that those early records also influenced such 19th-century excavators as Giovanni Belzoni and Henry Rhind. Both have commented on what they perceived as a lack of religious observance, claiming that the Qurnawi either had no mosque[12] or never visited one, while also ignoring their daily prayers.[13] Yet, the received and unquestioned wisdom from 16th, 17th, and 18th-century European travelers can only be partly responsible for the views of later writers such as Belzoni and Rhind. Their questioning the moral fortitude of the west bank villagers also resulted from failure to correctly interpret the nature of Egyptian spiritual expression. It took the observations made by another Egyptologist, William Adams, who in his monumental study of Nubia gave a comprehensive overview of the levels of spirituality he encountered there.[14] In most respects his observations also hold true for Upper Egypt, and much of what he says resonates with what we still find today in the villages of the Luxor west bank, where local spiritual expression comprises a mixture of popular, formal, and traditional religious practices. Adams documents the nature of religious observance, the practices associated with orthodox Islam that contrast with the folk religion as represented by the *sufi* schools with their belief in saints and miracles, and he recognizes the absence of most of the distinguishing features of liturgical architecture to be typical of *sufi* religious expression which favored the often inconspicuous *zāwiya* structures. His observations contrast with those of the above 19th-century excavators and provide an example of how modern practicing field archaeologists can also record aspects of the social and cultural contemporary landscape of the archaeological fieldwork location. It was because Belzoni and Rhind ignored that reality that they remained unaware of the nature of religious observance in the Theban foothills.[15]

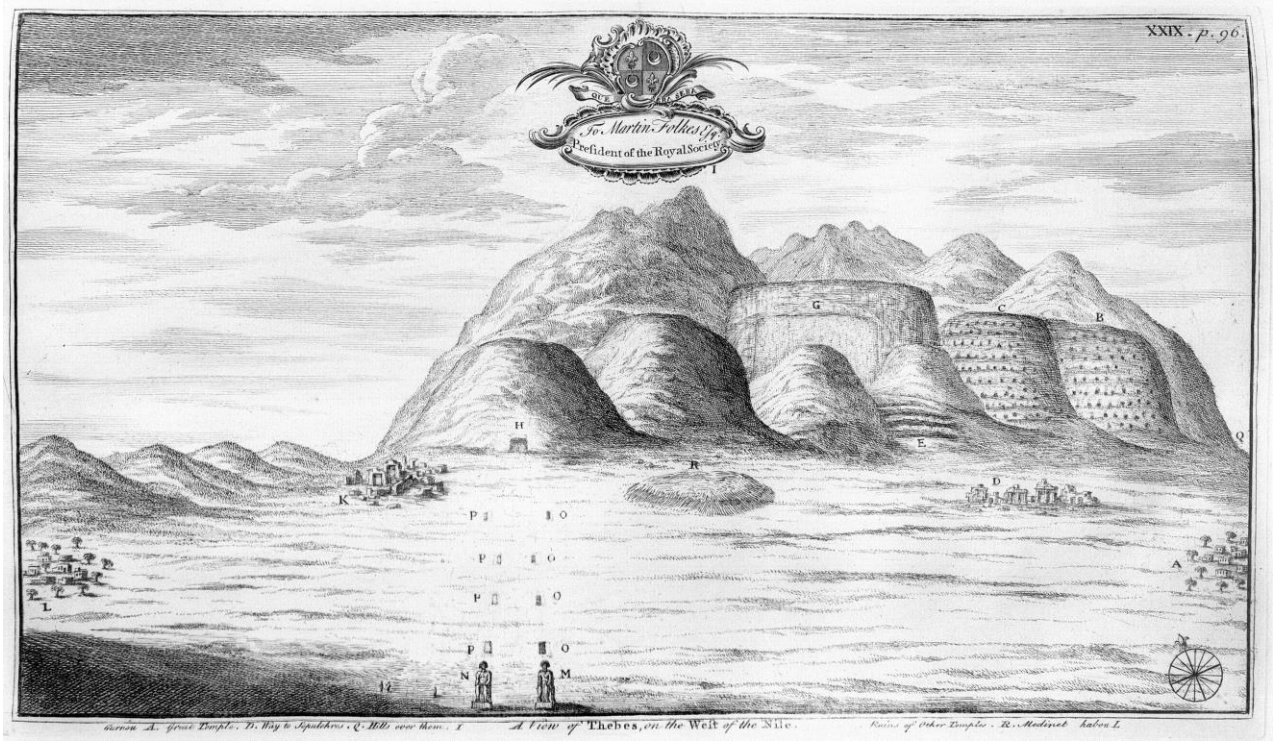


Figure 5: Illustration of the Qurn and the Theban necropolis by traveler Richard Pococke, who visited the Theban west bank in 1737. From *A Description of the East, and Some Other Countries I: Observations on Egypt* (London: W. Bowyer, 1743). Used by permission of the National Library of Australia.



Figure 6: William Prinsep's 1842 pen, ink, and watercolor sketch of "Tombs at Kurna, Thebes." Private collection. Courtesy of the Martyn Gregory Gallery, London. Catalogue 37, 1984.

Archaeological Fieldwork Practice: Expanding the View

The apparent mixture of disinterest in and contempt for the local population on the part of these early excavators in the necropolis, and the example set by William Adams's corrective, continue to hold a lesson for today's archaeologists, still.

The eloquent observation offered by Bori Németh of the fieldwork situation at Qurna, with its poignant call for a broader perspective on archaeological fieldwork practice and her proactive attitude to the full range of information that the stratigraphy—including its uppermost layers—can offer, is pertinent here:

> The setting, the environment conjures up a rich tapestry of what is the stuff of the trade: from the ancient to the contemporary, with all its actors and recipients busying themselves in their individual ways, both familiar and remote at the same time. Something to put one's finger on, not to let slip past unnoticed.[16]

In the absence of awareness of an archaeological field site's contemporary social surroundings, and while lacking a more holistic approach to fieldwork similar to that exemplified in the perspective of William Adams, there will indeed be much that is likely to "slip past unnoticed." It is an object lesson that is not only advocated for and practiced by Bori Németh but is also part of the ethos of the Hungarian Archaeological Mission, of which she is a member. From a cultural anthropologist's perspective, one defining aspect of that mission's objective and methodology is its apparent concern with the contemporary present that surrounds the excavation concession. The controlled excavation of the rubble of the demolished contemporary Qurnawi dwelling that once stood inside the Hungarian mission's excavation concession at al-Khūkha in the Theban necropolis is as much about ancient funerary architecture and beliefs as it is about understanding the unique contemporary and vernacular settlement pattern that had grown up around the ancient monuments in the necropolis. The interconnections that exist here between past and present and the adaptive reuse of the archaeological landscape of the necropolis has only recently been the subject of anthropological interest but has largely remained out of scope for excavating Egyptologists. By approaching the history of the necropolis in its broadest sense, the work of the Hungarian mission sets a certain benchmark for archaeological research in Egypt.[17] Such an approach would view the entire stratigraphy, including its most recent contemporary deposits, as a repository for evidence of human agency and action, rather than be limited to the pharaonic remains that to date have been the predominant focus of Egyptological research in this multi-layered, palimpsest, landscape.[18]

As a social anthropologist I lament the fact that contemporary human activity surrounding the excavation site is considered worthwhile only once people have left the scene; when the deposited physical remains of their erstwhile activities are being considered as a distinct period with its particular but archaeologically closed stratigraphic sequence that warrants investigation; and when Egyptologists' apparent engagement with the surrounding community during all these years was reduced to a waiting game, anticipating the villagers one-time removal from the ancient cemeteries so as to enable archaeological fieldwork amidst the rubble of their former dwellings to finally take place.[19] At best, once contemporary village life adjoining the excavation concession has been removed, any vestige of local villagers' more recent habitation will become "archaeology" and the material and stratigraphic telltale signs of human activity will merit archaeological fieldwork methodologies and reconstructive interpretation. But even then, instances of such an expanded practice have remained limited to date.[20]

A broader theoretical perspective on the above contested interplay between archaeologists' engagement with the ancient cemetery and its contemporary social environment is that archaeological landscapes of any era are not static and that even their deposited strata buried at depth can be subject to continual change.[21] It follows that the most recent stratigraphic sequence will be the least stable and constantly evolving. Elements generated by the activities of the surrounding community are being laid down under the eyes of the archaeologist and indeed, as shown by Bori Németh, archaeologists themselves may contribute to this process, leaving behind material remains to be interpreted by future colleagues.[22] Conversely, and beyond their physical impact on the topography and stratigraphy of the landscape, the very presence of the archaeologists working in the Theban necropolis has also proven to be of interest and has become the subject of ethnographic observation, as demonstrated in Neil Silberman's account of the conflicting interests of an Egyptian archaeologist working in Qurna.[23]

Following Németh and Silberman, archaeologists' physical and social presence in the landscape has already shown itself to be worthy of stratigraphic analysis and ethnographic description. This would equally be the case for the people who inhabit the social landscape surrounding the excavation concession. Their presence and present patterns of landscape-use may one day be past too,



Figure 7: Many Qurnawi consider themselves farmers, despite their mixed economy. The cultivation of sugarcane, the growing of crops for private consumption, and the raising of animals all contribute to expendable household income. Photograph by the author.

as has been demonstrated only too clearly in the case of the Qurnawi foothill settlements, where much of the detail has already "slipped past unnoticed."[24] Yet, social and cultural anthropological research methodologies have traditionally not formed a part of the research design applied to either the Theban west bank or to the social context of excavation sites more generally. Archaeologists have by and large remained unaware or unconvinced of the potential for ethnographic description to add a distinctive tone to the narrative voice that documents the excavation concession and its surrounds.

Recalibrating the Focus: Landscape Use Across Time

For archaeologists to become attuned to the social surroundings of their excavation concession will require a degree of recalibration. Alongside the actual research design of the mission, with its focus on the clearance, recording, and conservation of a particular tomb, funerary feature, or evidence of ancient human occupation and landscape use, the broader focus should also consider the context of *ongoing* human engagement with the characteristics and physicality of the surrounding landscape (Figure 7). Without necessarily subscribing to a deterministic role for the landscape in that engagement, it is nevertheless the particular relationship with the physical landscape and the ascribed ideational characteristics and distinctive forms of landscape-use associated with its interpretation over time that has defined most human activity in a given environment. In the case of the Theban necropolis, this applies to the Egyptians of ancient times, to the more recent community of Qurnawi, and to those professional archaeologists who have worked there at one time or other, each, in the above words of Bori Németh, "busying themselves in their individual ways, both familiar and remote at the same time."

The ancient Egyptians may have chosen the west bank foothills and wadis as an appropriate location for their mortuary rituals inspired by a culturally perceived association between funerary architectural convention and

the natural, pyramidal landscape form of the *Qurn*, the Theban mountain. Similarly, more recent population groups will have been drawn to the area not only for the agricultural opportunities provided by the Nile flood plain but also by the presence of "caves" offering opportunities for spiritual retreat, refuge against outside aggression, or respite from the summer heat. The decorated walls will have alerted those early Qurnawi settling there to the artificial nature of such "caves," but this will have played no role in their decision to adapt their use. First and foremost, people's choice of location will have stemmed from immediate survival needs and/or those dictated by lifestyle, both physical and metaphysical, thus effectively merging natural and cultural landscape characteristics into one of purposeful pragmatics based on criteria of suitability.

Today's archaeologists may similarly construct their engagement with the surrounding landscape for reasons that are specific to our age, emphasizing such socially valued pursuits as education, research, and heritage conservation as primary drivers. As motivators for their presence in and engagement with the Theban landscape, these can be seen to be quite distinct from the more immediate intellectual preoccupation with ancient Egypt that their profession demands. That is to say, ancient Egypt is not the ultimate, or at least not the only, reason for archaeologists being there. Their own place in the landscape rather stems from modern values and concerns, adding their own specific layer of ideational engagement with and philosophically motivated landscape use of the physical surroundings in this location.

Yet, these landscape considerations and the specific forms of human presence that at one time or other interacted with the natural west bank environment have become subordinate to a primary research design which maintains its focus on the activities of the ancient Egyptians in this location. It is in many respects regrettable that despite all the archaeological activity in the Theban necropolis, locally working field archaeologists have largely remained impervious to any ongoing human activity and the real-time formation of the final stratigraphic sequence of their archaeological field site.

Of course, if such would require not only active but also intellectual engagement with the surrounding Qurnawi community, then here we are not simply dealing with strict demarcations that would separate the practice of Egyptological and archaeological field research from social and cultural anthropological fieldwork methodologies. We also enter here into the fraught domain of local politics. Government regulations place conditions on excavation permits granted to foreign archaeological missions and the composition of their teams. Compliance with these conditions by foreign concession holders may discourage involvement with local communities for fear of their interests being seen as contrary to the economic and heritage-management objectives of Egyptian antiquities officials.[25] It is likely for such reasons that isolated attempts[26] at incorporating the local community into the archaeological project have met with opposition from the foreign mission's leadership.[27]

Toward Inclusive Research Designs: Ethnographic Observation and Archaeological Fieldwork Method

Countering such opposition may require something of a paradigm shift in both the philosophical approaches to archaeological and social science research among Egyptian government officials and the perspectives of foreign archaeological missions working in Egypt. A de-politicized framework that separates national economic objectives associated with tourism revenues from pure archaeological science would be necessary for a more holistically perceived archaeological practice to take root in Egypt. It would also foster an enabling environment for cooperation between separate government ministries necessary to achieve a more inclusive approach to social science research and to overcome the current bureaucratic and logistical hurdles associated with research permits.[28]

Such a science-focused practice should be free from any observed tensions in the relations between foreign archaeological missions and Egyptian antiquities officials. Foreign missions' fear of not being granted future excavation permits have prevented them from speaking out about the development plans on the Luxor east and west bank, including the destruction of Qurna[29] and appears to have similarly placed constraints around expedition members' interaction with members of the local community. From its perspective, Egypt may be unduly demanding compliance with restrictive bureaucratic requirements as a result of lingering views about neo-colonial motivations suspected of foreign archaeological missions working in Egypt. Neither of these entrenched politicized positions and attitudes that are enmeshed with archaeological practice in Egypt will be conducive to independent and objective information sharing and research.[30]

So, given the right environment for a holistic approach to archaeological fieldwork to be possible, what could an ethnographically conscious archaeological fieldwork practice look like and what sort of subject matter could be its focus? To start with the latter, and by way of example, an incomplete and randomly compiled list of topics that occupied this author during his "participant observation" anthropological fieldwork in Qurna may offer an



Figure 8: Conducting interviews and collecting stories. Photograph by the author.

impression of the diversity of materials that were gathered to paint a picture of the social and cultural character of life in the Theban necropolis, and which could similarly provide subject matter for a study of the excavation concession's social environment (Figure 8): Local oral histories; family histories; traditional mud-brick houses and their architectural forms and functions; religious perspectives and traditional beliefs and practices; the functioning of the *wajib* concept of social harmony; the functioning of the traditional dispute settlement mechanism; the plurality of local economic practices, including farming and agriculture, archaeological work, government work, and tourism work; education, including the government literacy program for women, *nahla umiyya*; gender; marriage; fertility practices; domestic organization and household economics; art and craft production by local artisans (Figure 9); restoration techniques; oral literature; children's games.

Such a research focus may be viewed as the demarcated domain of the social anthropologist, but it is especially at those archaeological field sites where the concession to excavate is located in the midst of a resident community that opportunities will exist for engagement with the social character of the surrounding landscape, and where the layered nature of existence offers scope for archaeologists to interact with both the social context of their field site, and with different academic disciplines and their differing methodologies. If the opportunity for such interaction is grasped, then the local community may inform our knowledge of the contemporary and most recently deposited stratigraphic period, which should be an integrated element in the narrative of human presence in that location.[31]

Evidently, such an approach in many respects comes too late for the Theban necropolis but, as also Deir al-Medina reminds us, workmen's villages are the archaeology of the future. Two hundred years of archaeological practice in the necropolis has seen opportunities go begging, and little or no attention has been paid to the social environment in which that work took place. It seems tragic that archaeologists are now trying to glean and interpret from the vestiges of a former settlement pattern what could have been accessed in its entirety and understood directly, had their research design allowed them to look and record, had they been encouraged to foster the necessary amicable relations with surrounding villagers, and had they ventured to engage more proactively on this with members of the then resident community.[32] The mismanaged heritage management at al-Qurna provides an object lesson of how quickly elements of a living community can be lost only to become archaeological subject matter, even as their real-time physical presence was largely ignored.

This is not to say that every field archaeologist working in Egypt should become a social anthropologist. The obvious disciplinary boundaries, the relevant training, or lack of personal interests will militate against this in most if not all cases. But there are aspects of the social life that



Figure 9: Some of the materiality of local craft production includes limestone, alabaster, and soapstone. In addition to these, woodcarvings and copies of wall paintings executed on stuccoed mud-slabs demonstrate a wide variety of skills and preferences on the part of Qurnawi artisans. Photograph by the author.

surrounds the excavation concession that will be observable to field archaeologists or that can be explored during interaction with local workers.[33] These can be recorded in the mission's research field notes and where relevant be integrated in or documented as an adjunct to the published excavation reports. For better or for worse, snippets of such do in fact exist in the archaeological literature,[34] and both William Adams and Zoltán Fábián have already demonstrated that there can indeed be a place for ethnographically focused information in the published record. The question is how to integrate a more systematic approach to the collecting and documenting of ethnographic data into archaeological fieldwork, not only to add context to the fieldwork narrative, but to benefit a future analysis and understanding of the social environment in which archaeological field research in that location took place.

It may well be that historical and ethnographic snippets derived from interaction by archaeologists with their locally hired workers and members of the surrounding community still lay embedded in the excavation records of foreign archaeological missions that have a long history of archaeological fieldwork practice in the necropolis. The archived excavation records and personal diaries of past missions' team members may establish the extent to which any direct engagement with the social surroundings of the excavation concession in fact took place and could provide valuable fragments of information obtained through daily contact with local workers, during social visits to village acquaintances, or through dealings with local people in the surrounding areas more generally.

An assessment of the relative quality and use of such archival records could be used to assist with the development of a targeted ethnographic approach for inclusion in future research designs that involve a resident community inhabiting or residing in proximity to the archaeological fieldwork location. Conversely, a more holistically conceived fieldwork research design of this nature would guide the collecting of ethnographic data that can provide insights into the most recent history of local landscape use in archaeological contexts.

Equally useful—in the case of Qurna—would be information that can still be provided by currently employed Qurnawi workers who used to live in the surrounding foothills before the relocations and demolitions took effect. If one of the social anthropologist's principal research methods consists of "participant observation," then excavating field archaeologists participating in the lives of their local workmen—often for many years and during consecutive "seasons"—would be eminently placed to document, to the extent possible and given the constraints identified above, aspects of the local and wider social context in which their field operations in the midst of a local community take place. Not too great a leap of the imagination, a mission's field records therefore could be expected to contain such social observations as may be obtained from archaeologists' everyday working contacts with members of the local community.

It may be the case that practicing field archaeologists will see little merit in expanding their specific focus in this manner or place additional demands on limited research budgets. Furthermore, not all of ethnography's "participant observation" activities listed above may fall within the range of a practicing field archaeologist's daily

movements or such local social networks as can be maintained during busy and confined annual fieldwork seasons by members of the mission.

Yet, the American use of the term "anthropology" offers the possibility for engagement with the present as well as with the past. That is, within the American academy the integration of archaeological practice within the broader anthropological "project" allows scope for more specific social anthropological and ethnographic objectives to be integrated into the design of Egyptological field research. It would therefore not be too farfetched to suggest that an ethnographic focus could be explored by a member of the mission tasked with the study of the excavation's contemporary social context. The question remains how to achieve this if both professional demarcations and broad consensus indicate that the archaeologists themselves are not the most appropriate persons to pursue and document such information.

An obvious model that joins Egyptological and social anthropological research objectives would be for archaeological missions in Egypt to engage a qualified social anthropologist as a registered member of the expedition's team and who, as such, would be specified in the permit application. While affiliated cultural anthropology departments may be able to provide personnel from their tenured or contracted staff, a disadvantage of this approach would be that those departments may not necessarily possess the appropriate specializations or language background to align themselves with a project in Egypt. Contracting an appropriately qualified consulting anthropologist will be beyond the budgets of many institutions concerned and thus not be an option. More importantly, incidental and ad hoc appointments of this type will not allow for the sort of capacity building required to establish a body of practitioners attuned to the multi-disciplinary context of an archaeological excavation.

A preferred second model, therefore, would favor the involvement in Egyptian expeditions of graduate social or cultural anthropology students who would take their place as a resident member of the team. Through their graduate fieldwork in this setting they would train to professionally join the wider group of occupational specializations that increasingly characterize archaeological field research. That is, as graduate students, they would not only provide their ethnographic perspective on the distinct environment of an archaeological field site and its more recent stratigraphic data, but they would also be contributing to the formation of a professional specialization equipped to offer this particular kind of analysis in such a context.

In practical terms, graduate anthropology students specializing in aspects of contemporary Egyptian society should be able to find a suitable "fieldwork location" in those university departments that have a focus on ancient Egypt.[35] Pre-fieldwork research would include identifying and collating any ethnographic information contained in the archived fieldwork records of that institution's Egyptian expedition, followed by eligibility for active field research and inclusion in the mission's permit application as a specialist member of its expedition team. The dissertation that would ultimately result from such parallel research will complement the archaeological analysis of the field site by providing both a narrative of the concession's social surroundings and an interpretation of the excavation site's modern stratigraphy.

Beyond the dedicated role of a mission's ethnographer, what must be a responsibility of the archaeologist is to remain cognizant of and be an advocate for the heritage preservation of any material remains that, in the case of Qurna, illustrate aspects of the particular settlement assemblage of the Qurnawi stratigraphic sequence. This would go beyond only preserving the foundations and artifactual remains of Qurnawi houses that are architecturally associated with adjoining ancient rock-cut tombs. More broadly, it would also include preserving the remains of standing features such as walls that have not been completely bulldozed, to indicate elements of the previously existing settlement pattern in the necropolis, and, importantly, the recording and preservation of any remaining architectural vernacular features such as mud granaries and mud storage structures[36] that may still be contained within tomb chambers. As archaeological features they document some of the typifying characteristics of the Qurnawi stratigraphic sequence, evidencing how human occupation took hold here through the adaptive reuse of an ancient cemetery with its distinctive forms of repurposed landscape use during the modern period. Field archaeologists should consider these as important remnants of a one-time social landscape and settlement pattern, and oppose their removal on grounds—often argued by Egyptian inspectors and antiquities officials—that such archaeological features are "not pharaonic" or are "not antiquities" (cf. Figures. 6, 10).



Figure 10: A variety of grain cylinders and domestic storage spaces shaped from mud complemented al-Qurna's vernacular architectural assemblage of tomb, tomb-forecourt, and house. Elements of all of these are visible in this image of one spectacular example that demonstrates the beauty and versatility of mud architecture. Much of this vernacular storage had already fallen into disuse as a result of changes in agricultural production (from wheat to sugarcane cultivation) and the uptake of modern consumer goods. Nevertheless, there will be those that remain in tomb chambers that once formed part of contemporary Qurnawi dwelling spaces. Photograph courtesy of Caroline Simpson and Elina Paulin-Grothe.

Oral Folkloric Traditions: The Archaeologist as Literary Copyist

While a more systematic approach is called for, the phenomenon of archaeological missions recording observations about aspects of the social character of a local community is not new, as we have seen. The layered nature of existence here will have created the potential for dialogue—even if only marginally—between differing academic disciplines and it can therefore be expected that archaeologists from time to time have ventured into the realm of more contemporary social observation, giving tangible evidence of their understanding—or lack thereof—of local affairs and mores in their private correspondence, personal papers or published works.[37]

At least one area for which there is some evidence that it attracted the interest of earlier archaeologists working in the Theban necropolis concerns what may have been a rich oral literary corpus that was in existence in the villages of the Theban west bank. Indications of both their interest in and the existence of such a body of oral literature may be gleaned from the few actual stories occasionally referenced in the archeological literature.[38]

Elsewhere I have provided several stories collected in Qurna during anthropological fieldwork.[39] They are examples of the Qurnawi folkloric literary corpus and are

representative of the sort of storytelling for which—despite the intrusion of television—remnants may still be found on the west bank of Luxor. As suggested in the above-listed subject matter for a study of the excavation concession's social environment, expanding the repertoire of such oral literature could be included among the activities of an archaeological mission's resident ethnographer. Further analysis seeking to locate possible sources and integrating this material in the established broader thematic framework of the oral literary and folkloric traditions of rural Upper Egypt would provide an additional research angle. Such research would also reinforce the ethnographer's close connections with their archaeological fieldwork colleagues: the joint focus on literary sources—even if obtained in different ways—demonstrates the relative intellectual proximity in which both archaeologists and social anthropologists work when Qurna is their field site. If ancient textual sources are one focus of Egyptological research, then equally archaeological missions could expand their focus to ethnographically gather contemporary oral narratives that also originate from the Theban necropolis, enabling analysis of Upper Egyptian folkloric traditions by relevant anthropological and literary or folkloric specialists.

Oral literature, however, is only one among many of the topics for which ethnographic information may still be collected by members of archaeological missions working on excavation sites in Egypt. As I have indicated, enlisting the collaboration of the mission's local workmen and contact with surrounding villagers may provide a suitable point of entry towards such wide-ranging information gathering. Nevertheless, specific reference to the corpus of Qurnawi oral literature here is made to highlight that it can provide a starting point for Egyptologists who may view the interest in these narratives by several of their predecessors as an inspiring example to become similarly attuned to the excavation site's contemporary social context. The existing small repertoire of documented Theban west bank oral literature finds its origins in the activities of those 19th- and 20th-century archaeologists who excavated in Qurna. While the strictly demarcated areas of specialization characteristic of modern scientific inquiry allows us to argue that such activities were entirely "extracurricular," the point is that these archaeologists not only focused on what might be hidden under their feet, but that they were both conscious of and showed an interest in the surrounding social environment within which they worked. Their attitude provides an example for contemporary archaeological fieldwork practice, one that may have implications for the research design and composition of expedition teams. This holds true not only for the Theban west bank, but also for all other archaeological sites in Egypt where the concession to excavate has to take account of the presence of local communities, the social setting of the research location, and its uppermost stratigraphic sequence. As Henry Rhind observed all those years ago:

> it must be a very determined antiquarianism that, even on such a site as that of Thebes, can, under the circumstances, look so exclusively to the past as to close its eyes to the living interests of the present or the prospects of the future.[40]

Notes

1 In this paper, the name Qurna and al-Qurna are used interchangeably. The areas of Qurna that were subject to the 2006–2010 relocations included the northern area of Dra 'Abu al-Naga and the central foothills area of Shaykh 'Abd al-Qurna and al-Khūkha. Since that time, the inhabitants of the southern area of Qurnat Mara'i have also been relocated and a number of their houses demolished, although several still remain. For a discussion of the component parts that make up larger al-Qurna, see: Kees van der Spek, *The Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun: History, Life, and Work in the Villages of the Theban West Bank* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2011), 39–51. For the local names given to the inhabited areas of the Theban necropolis as distinct from the better known archaeological nomenclature, see van der Spek 2011, 47–51.

2 Among these, the house of the renowned 'Abd al-Rasul family mentioned in John Romer, *Valley of the Kings: Exploring the Tombs of the Pharaohs* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1981), 129–138; "Yanni's House," for which see Jason Thompson, *Sir Gardner Wilkinson and his Circle* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 104–105; and Edward William Lane, *Description of Egypt—Notes and Views in Egypt and Nubia, Made during the Years 1825, –26, –27, and –28*, edited and with an introduction by Jason Thompson (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000), 339; and the house of the *Umdah*, referenced in Howard Carter, "Summer Life and a Tale from the Coffee-hearth," *Autobiographical Sketches,* Notebook 16, sketch v (Oxford: Griffith Institute, University of Oxford, n.d.), 115–121; and in van der Spek 2011, 383–386. Also included should have

been a last example of a *zāwiya* building. These structures formed an integral part of the social life of the necropolis community, both to provide a space for such events as the communal gatherings upon the death of a family member and as the place where acts of *sufi* devotion can be carried out. For a description of this type of liturgical architecture by an archaeologist, see William Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 574–576. For a broader statement of significance and of what has been lost at Qurna, see van der Spek 2011, 13.

3 For examples of *hajj* paintings in Qurna, see Ann Parker and Avon Neal, *Hajj Paintings: Folk Art of the Great Pilgrimage* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

4 For Hassan Fathy's famous, but ultimately failed, architectural experiment, see Hassan Fathy, "Planning and Building in the Arab Tradition: The Village Experiment at Gourna," in M. Berger (ed.), *The New Metropolis in the Arab World* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1963), 210–229; and: Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973). For the work of Hassan Fathy more broadly, see James Steele, *An Architecture for People: The Complete Works of Hassan Fathy* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1997).

5 Carla Burri, "Le Voyage en Égypte du Vénitien Anonyme: Août–Septembre 1589," in Carla Burri and Serge Sauneron (eds.), *Voyages en Egypte des années 1589, 1590 & 1591: Le Vénitien anonyme—Le Seigneur de Villamont—Le Hollandais Jan Sommer* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1971), 5–153.

6 James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773, in Five Volumes I* (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1790).

7 C. N. S. Sonnini de Manoncour, *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt* (London: J. Debrett, 1800).

8 Vivant Denon, *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt I–III* (London: Longman and Rees, Paternoster-Row, and Richard Phillips, 1803).

9 Robert Richardson, *Travels along the Mediterranean and Parts Adjacent in Company with the Earl of Belmore, during the Years 1816–17–18*, 2 volumes (London: Cadell, 1822).

10 For such an historically informed approach to anthropological analysis, see: Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, 1997).

11 Kees van der Spek, "Feasts, Fertility, and Fear: Qurnawi Spirituality in the Ancient Theban Landscape," in Peter F. Dorman and Betsy M. Bryan (eds.), *Sacred Space and Sacred Function in Ancient Thebes*, Occasional Proceedings of the Theban Workshop, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 61 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2007), 180–181; van der Spek 2011, 53–133.

12 Giovanni Belzoni, *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia* (London: John Murray, 1820; Westmead: Gregg International Publishers Limited, 1971), 159.

13 Alexander Henry Rhind, *Thebes: Its Tombs and Their Tenants* (London: Longman, 1862; New Jersey: Georgias Press, 2002), 279.

14 Adams 1977, 574–577.

15 For examples of 19th-century religious observance and associated infrastructure at Qurna, see van der Spek 2011, 116.

16 Bori Németh, "Letters from Gurna—The Mix-and-Match Game of an Excavation," in E. Bechtold, A. Gulyás, and A. Hasznos (eds.), *From Illahun to Djeme—Papers Presented in Honour of Ulrich Luft*, BAR International Series 2311 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011), 183–188.

17 Zoltán Imre Fábián, "A thébai el-Hoha domb déli lejtőjének feltárása Nefermenu TT 184 számú sziklasírjának körzetében—2010. 1. rész: Qurna egy sarka" ("Excavations at the southern slope of el-Khokha in the area of Theban Tomb 184 [Nefermenu]—2010: A corner of Qurna)," *Orpheus Noster* 3.1 (2011): 5–26.

18 Caroline Simpson (personal communication) informs me that the Swiss-Egyptian Joint Mission in Syene/Old Aswan under the direction of Cornelius von Pilgrim has in fact adopted this approach to "total stratigraphy."

19 For a rare example of a study that took note of the Luxor west bank's vernacular architectural features, see Diethelm Eigner, *Ländliche Architektur und Siedlungsformen im Ägypten der Gegenwart*, Beitrage zur Ägyptologie 6, Veröffentlichungen der Institut für Afrikanistik und Ägyptologie der Universität Wien 30 (Vienna: H. Mukarovsky, 1984).

20 To date, only the Hungarian Archaeological Mission and the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) have directed their attention to the archaeological record of the Qurnawi stratigraphic sequence. For the work of the Hungarian Archaeological Mission see: Fábián 2011; for the work of ARCE, see Andrew Bednarski, "Qurna Site Improvement Project: Recording the Latest Stratigraphic Layers of Sheikh Abd el Qurna and el Khokha," *ARCE Bulletin* 202 (2013): 1–9.

21 Edward Harris, *Principles of Archaeological Stratigraphy* (London: Academic Press, 1989), 52–53.

22 Németh 2011, 183–188.

23 Neil Asher Silberman, "An Uneasy Inheritance," in Neil Asher Silberman, *Between Past and Present—Archaeology, Ideology, and Nationalism in the Modern*

Middle East (New York: Henry Holt and Company), 153–168.

[24] Sadly, and despite the fact that the Theban necropolis forms part of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed property of "Ancient Thebes with its Necropolis," UNESCO could not prevent, and may even have contributed to, the destruction of the Theban necropolis's social landscape. UNESCO's own monitoring missions and commissioned expert reports recognized the intrinsic merit of the Theban cultural landscape, but these were not sufficient to safeguard the vernacular and social character of the Theban necropolis. For a case study of the World Heritage Committee's deliberations in relation to Qurna, see: Kees van der Spek, "The Valley of the Kings in the Lives of Modern Egyptians: The People of Qurna," in Richard Wilkinson and Kent Weeks (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Valley of the Kings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 567–581. For in-depth and wide-ranging analyses of the conflicted and politicized nature of UNESCO, the reader is referred to the recent studies by Lynn Meskell, whose new research focuses on the role of UNESCO in relation to heritage rights, sovereignty, and international politics, for which see, *inter alia*, Lynn Meskell, "UNESCO's World Heritage Convention at 40: Challenging the Economic and Political Order of International Heritage Conservation," *Current Anthropology* 54 (2013): 483–494; L. Meskell, C. Liuzza, E. Bertacchini, and D. Saccone, "Multilateralism and UNESCO World Heritage: Decision-making, States Parties, and Political Processes," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21(5) (2014): 423-440; and Lynn Meskell, "Gridlock: UNESCO, Global Conflict and Failed Ambitions," *World Archaeology* 47.2 (Special Issue: *Public Archaeology*) (2015): 225–238.

[25] Van der Spek 2011, 330–339.

[26] For an example of such engagement see Claudia Liuzza, "Social Contexts of Archaeological Research and Associated Communities—The Case of Gourna, Egypt," in Sorin Hermon and Franco Niccolucci (eds.), *Communicating Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century: The Chiron Project and its Research Opportunities* (Budapest: Archaeolingua for EPOCH Publications, 2007), 84–93.

[27] Claudia Liuzza was unable to continue her preliminary research "because I was strongly advised to stop" (personal communication, 27 June 2010).

[28] While archaeological research is practiced under the auspices of the Ministry of State for Antiquities through the Supreme Council of Antiquities, approvals to conduct social science research proper are beyond its jurisdiction, potentially presenting practical obstacles when it comes to including social anthropological fieldworkers in the research design of foreign archaeological missions. Even so, I received personal permission to conduct my research from the then Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Gaballa Ali Gaballa, before I commenced my ethnographic studies in the Theban necropolis in 1997. On the issue of obtaining such approvals from the Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Ministry of Higher Education, see van der Spek 2011, 439 note 27. Apart from formal research permits, social anthropological research among the members of a community cannot take place without the approval and cooperation of its members. The information collected during fieldwork in Qurna between 1997 and 1999 was with the agreement and voluntary participation of Qurnawi. Visiting Shaykh Muhammad al-Tayyeb at the mosque in the al-Hasasna district of Qurna to present credentials and to seek his consent formed part of "the unofficial approval of key persons" (van der Spek 2011, 439 note 27).

[29] It should be noted that many of the constraints and conditions imposed on excavation permits came from Zahi Hawass during his tenure as Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, between 2002 and 2011. It was also during his administration that long-standing plans to relocate the Qurnawi to new settlements and to demolish the vernacular infrastructure of their hamlets inside the Theban necropolis gained traction. See: Zahi Hawass, *Life in Paradise: The Noble Tombs of Egypt* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009), 266–268.

[30] For an account of the politicized context within which the destruction of the Qurnawi hamlets in the Theban foothills between 2006 and 2010 took place, see: "The Ethnography of Eviction," in van der Spek 2011, 319–346.

[31] Visiting artists (among whom artists from the so-called Marsam-school and Egyptologist Horst Jaritz) have sought to capture something of that narrative in their artistic representations of the Theban west bank social and archaeological landscapes, suggesting that the visibly layered palimpsest of history here—with its juxtaposition of a living community and a City of the Dead, each containing within itself facets of the breadth of cultural manifestations and diversity particular to the human species across space and time—is remarkable enough to merit recording.

[32] In defense of those field archaeologists who are not wilfully negligent in respect of their social surroundings, it would be tempting to postulate that the historical lack of interest in the necropolis's Qurnawi—other than in their being implicated in alleged illicit excavations—and their absence from archaeological and ethnographic

consideration by Egyptologists, may be inherent in an aspect of the theory of stratigraphic interpretation: "On any site which has been disturbed, part of the surfaces of earlier strata and periods will have been destroyed. These areas may be referred to as interfaces of destruction. They may be defined as abstract interfaces which record the areas of a given unit of stratification or period on a site which has been disturbed or destroyed by later excavation. [….] these forms of negative evidence are seldom adequately recorded" (Edward Harris 1989, 68).

[33] For an example as practiced by the Hungarian Archaeological Mission see: Zoltán Imre Fábián 2011, 5–26, n. 23.

[34] For an example see: Herbert Eustace Winlock, *Excavations at Deir El Bahri 1911–1931* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1942), 41; as also discussed in van der Spek 2011, 28–32.

[35] Suitable candidates could be selected from among those who are already conversant or fluent in Arabic, including postgraduate students of Arabic language background, or selected through institutional affiliation with relevant departments at the American University in Cairo.

[36] See Eigner 1984 and van der Spek 2011, 166–169.

[37] On the evidence of it, Howard Carter proved himself to be something of a mentor for Arthur Weigall in his relations with local communities; see Julie Hankey, *A Passion for Egypt* (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2001), 50; van der Spek 2011, 222–223.

[38] A published example is "The Parable of the Sultan's Lion," in Rhind 1862, 305–307. Also see: Howard Carter n.d., 115–121, containing Howard Carter's transcription of "The Tale of the Rat and the Snake." For a first published version see: van der Spek 2011, 383–386. For a discussion of Qurnawi oral literature and further examples see: van der Spek 2016, 576–579.

[39] See: "The Story of a Liar and His Assistant" (in Dutch), in Kees van der Spek, "Een ander soort van graven—Culturele antropologie in de Thebaanse Dodenstad," *Ta-Mery* 7 (2014): 40–71. An English translation of this story is in preparation for publication in a forthcoming *Festschrift*; and "Patience is the Head of Wisdom," in van der Spek 2016, 578–579.

[40] Rhind 1862, vii–viii.