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QAU EL-KEBIR

قاو الكبير

*Wolfram Grajetzki*

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## QAU EL-KEBIR

## قاو الكبير

Wolfram Grajetzki

Qau el-Kebir  
Qaw el-Kebir

*Qau el-Kebir, called Tjebu in ancient Egyptian and Antaeopolis in Greek, was a village in Middle Egypt and the capital of the 10<sup>th</sup> Upper Egyptian nome. The main deity of the town was Nemtyny. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, substantial parts of a Ptolemaic temple were still preserved, but they were destroyed by a change of the Nile's streambed. The cemeteries in the deserts east of the town include tombs of almost all periods of Egyptian history beginning from the Badarian Period. Those of the First Intermediate Period are especially well equipped and are an important source for burial customs of that period in a provincial town. The three large, rock-cut tombs of Middle Kingdom governors belong to the biggest private tombs built in the Middle Kingdom. However, because of the destruction of the tombs, the dating and sequence of the governors during the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty remains problematic. In the New Kingdom, the tomb of the governor May equipped with a sarcophagus and datable to Thutmose III was built. Several New Kingdom hippopotami bone deposits are perhaps connected with the cult of Nemtyny and Seth. The Ptolemaic temple dates to Ptolemy VI. Its pronaos with 3 × 6 columns is known from depictions in the Description de l'Égypte.*

قاو الكبير، عرفت بثيبو في اللغة المصرية القديمة وبإسم انتايوبوليس باليونانية، هي قرية بمصر الوسطى وعاصمة الإقليم العاشر بمصر العليا. كان الإله نمتي هو الإله الرئيسي للمدينة. في مطلع القرن التاسع عشر، كانت لا تزال أجزاء كبيرة من المعبد البطلمي صامدة، ولكنها دمرت نظراً لتغيير مجرى النيل. تحتوي الجبانة الواقعة في الصحراء شرق المدينة على العديد من المقابر التي تعود إلى عصور مختلفة من التاريخ المصري، بداية من الحضارة البدائية، والجدير بالذكر أن مقابر عصر الانتقال الأول معدة بصورة جيدة جداً وتعد مصدر هام لعادات الدفن في تلك الفترة التاريخية في بلدة ريفية. المقابر الثلاث الكبيرة المحفورة في الصخر والتي ترجع إلى حكام الأقاليم من الدولة الوسطى تنتمي الي مجموعة أضخم المقابر الخاصة التي شيدت خلال عصر الدولة الوسطى، ولكن بسبب تدمير تلك المقابر، لا يزال تأريخ وتسلسل الحكام خلال عصر الأسرة الثانية عشر مسألة جدالية. وخلال عصر الدولة الحديثة، تم بناء مقبرة الحاكم ماي والتي إحتوت على تابوت وتؤرخ إلى عصر الملك تحتمس الثالث. العديد من ودائع عظام حيوان فرس النهر من عصر الدولة الحديثة بالمنطقة، والتي قد تكون متعلقة بعبادة نمتي وست. يؤرخ المعبد البطلمي إلى عصر الملك بطليموس السادس، ويعرف البروناووس ذو الأعمدة من مجموعة وصف مصر.



Qau el-Kebir, often just called Qau or Qaw, was a settlement in Middle Egypt; in Egyptology, it refers to the town Tjebu (*Tbw*, “city of sandals”) and its cemeteries. Tjebu was the capital of the 10<sup>th</sup> Upper Egyptian nome, called “Wadjet” (Gomaà 1986: 239). Until the early nineteenth century, parts of a temple built by Ptolemy VI Philometor were visible remains of the ancient town. However, the stones of the temple were reused in the early nineteenth century for a palace at Assiut. The few remains left were destroyed in a flood in 1821 (Steckeweh 1936: 1), but the name is still used for the town and its cemeteries, although the actual settlement with the remains of the ancient town has completely disappeared. Nowadays the nearest village is al-Itmanya. The main deity of Tjebu was Nemtywy, called Antaios by the Greeks. The name Qau goes back to Coptic **ⲠⲚⲟⲩⲩ**/**ⲠⲠⲟⲩⲩ**, which is derived from ancient Egyptian *ḏw-k3* (“high mountain”). The latter name is attested from the Late Period on and perhaps originally only referred to the eastern mountains in the region, but later became the name of the town itself (Gomaà 1986: 239). The Greeks called the town Antaeopolis, “the city of Antaios” (Helck 1974: 96 - 97).

#### *Location and Layout of Site*

The ancient town was located about 45 km south of Assiut on the eastern bank of the Nile. The cemeteries of the town lie along the desert edge and were labeled by Guy Brunton with numbers (Cem. 400, Cem. 1300, Cem. 1400, Cem. 1450; cf. fig. 1). The “South Cemetery” is the biggest and the one closest to the remains of the ancient town. It was most probably the main cemetery. The great Middle Kingdom tombs of the governors are situated about 3 km north of the ancient town at the cliffs of the desert escarpment. Placing these tombs at some distance from the town may have been for reasons of prestige. This is the nearest place where the high desert comes close to the fertile land within the region of

the town. There are also important limestone quarries (Petrie 1930: pl. XIX 2, 3).

#### *Pre- and Early Dynastic Periods*

The earliest remains at the cemeteries of Qau el-Kebir belong to the Badarian Period. In later times, these cemeteries were heavily disturbed so that only a few graves and some uncontexted artifacts were found (Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928: 3). About 70 tombs belong to the Naqada Period. People were buried in holes in the ground or shallow shafts. They were often wrapped in matting. Common burial goods are pottery vessels and beads (Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928: 48 - 49, pl. XXX).

About 65 tombs were recorded by Brunton for the Early Dynastic Period at Qau el-Kebir. Most burials are again surface graves or shafts with the body of the deceased placed in a contracted position. Burial goods include pottery, sometimes stone vessels, jewelry, and tools (Brunton 1927: 10 - 18, pls. X - XI). There are also several “staircase tombs” (fig. 2) cut into the ground with a staircase leading to underground burial chambers, evidently belonging to the local ruling class or to people of some higher social level (Brunton 1927: pl. XII). One of these tombs (429) still contained a large number of important objects, such as stone vessels and a copper ewer with a short inscription: “the priest of Nemty, Hetep” (Brunton 1927: 11, pl. XVIII).

#### *Old Kingdom*

The burials of the following Old Kingdom (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasties) were in general poorly equipped, with some pottery vessels and personal adornments. In this time, pot burials are well attested, often for children. There are hardly any burials that might belong to the local ruling classes. However, on a hill east of al-Itmanya small relief fragments belonging to the decoration of a mastaba were found (Brunton 1927: 68, pl. XLI, 18 - 23). This indicates that the local ruling class was buried in such tomb types. At Hemamieh some Old Kingdom rock-cut tombs, all dating to the 5<sup>th</sup>

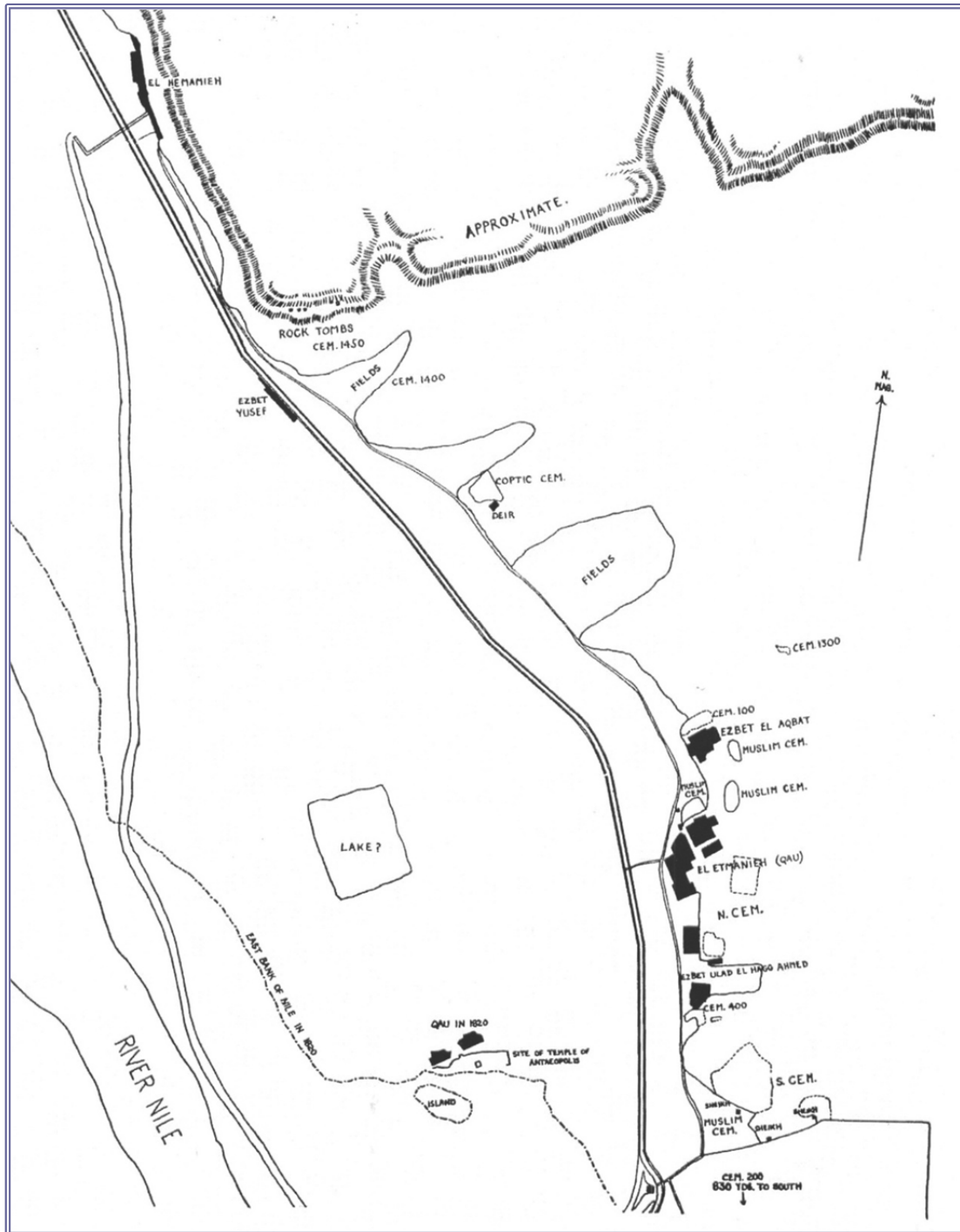


Figure 1. Map of Qau el-Kebir/Qau.

Dynasty, were found (Khouli and Kanawati 1990). It remains uncertain whether they belonged to governors living in Qau el-Kebir or to another, closer town (for the Old Kingdom governors of the 10<sup>th</sup> Upper Egyptian nome, see Kanawati 1991).

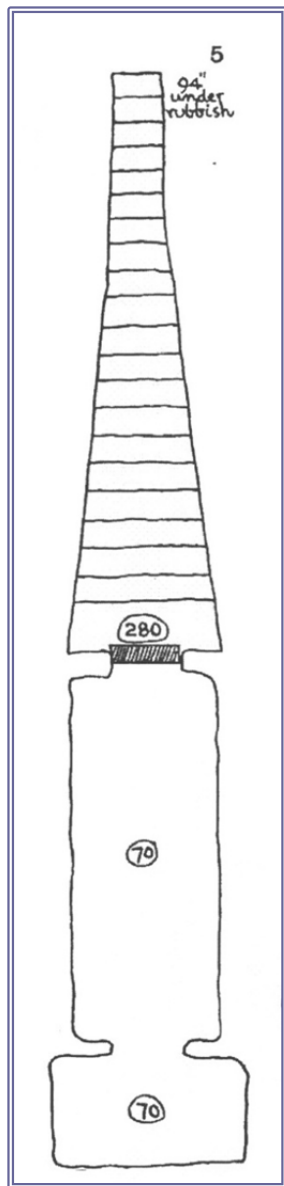


Figure 2. Early Dynastic staircase tomb.

#### *First Intermediate Period*

A large number of burials at Qau el-Kebir and in the region date from the end of the Old Kingdom to the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. Many of them were well equipped

with personal adornments, cosmetic objects, pottery, and stone vessels. The richness and large number of these tombs in a time normally seen as a period of decline and poverty remains a point of discussion (Kemp 2006: 309; Seidlmayer 1987: 176 - 178). Most of the burials of this period are simple shaft tombs. However, there are also some shaft tombs with a chamber at the bottom. Most probably, the buried people were not mummified but placed into simple wooden boxes, often in a slightly contracted position on their left side. According to other sites, it seems that it was the custom to lay the body with the head to the north; however, the bodies at Qau el-Kebir were not strictly oriented to the north but placed parallel to the Nile. The pottery found here and at Badari, Matmar, and Mostagedda has been evaluated several times. The corpus is perhaps the most important one for the First Intermediate Period (Seidlmayer 1990: 124 - 210). The cemeteries are especially rich in button seals, disk-shaped stamp seals (Brunton 1927: pls. XXXII - XXXIV). In one tomb (7695), a “Letter to the Dead” written on both sides of a bowl was found, addressing the dead father on one side and the dead mother on the other, and appealing to them for help in a legal or family dispute (Gardiner and Sethe 1928: 3 - 5, 17 - 19, pls. II - IIIA). In some other tombs, pottery hes-vases with short inscriptions were found (Brunton 1927: pl. XLI, 1 - 13). In the First Intermediate Period, from the time of Wahankh Intef II, the nome and therefore Qau el-Kebir belonged to the Theban territory (Gomaà 1979: 89 - 90).

#### *Middle Kingdom*

In the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, several large tombs for the local governors were cut into the rock north of the town (D’Amicone 1988, 1999; Martellièrre 2008; Melandri 2011; Petrie 1930; Steckeweh 1936). They rank among the most monumental private tombs built in the Middle Kingdom. The three biggest belonged to “mayors” (*ḥꜣty-ꜣ*) and “overseers of priests” (*jmj-rꜣ ḥmw-nꜣr*) Wahka I, Ibu, and Wahka II. The mayor Sobekhotep was buried in the

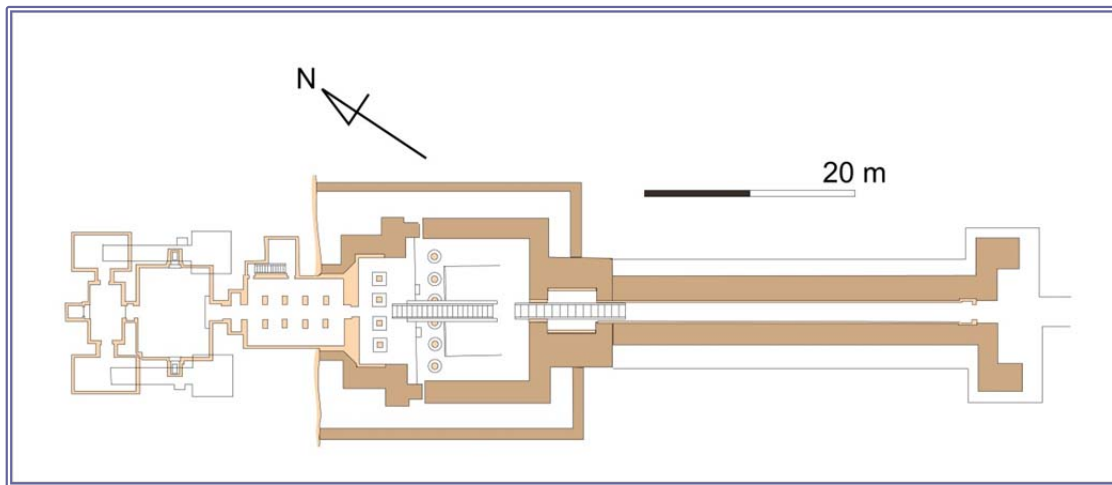


Figure 3. Plan of the tomb of Wahka I; brown: mud-bricks, yellow: stone.

slightly smaller fourth tomb. All tombs were found already heavily looted and destroyed. Therefore, their exact dating and the sequence of the Middle Kingdom governors remains problematic. The three larger governor tombs were all cut into the cliffs at the same level (fig. 3). At the edge of the cultivation was some kind of gateway, which is only partly preserved for the tomb of Wahka I. Little can be said about its overall structure. The foundations were made of mud-bricks. Behind the gateway was a causeway, again mainly made of mud-bricks with some stone paving going up to the cult chapel of the tomb proper. The cult chapels were carved into the rock and had an entrance courtyard with columns at the back. In this court was a staircase leading up to a smaller columned hall. There followed a second hall with several side chambers; presumably the central rear chamber was, as at other sites, the location for offering to the statue of the deceased. The underground burial chambers were reached by a shaft. At least one of the burial chambers discovered by Schiaparelli was decorated with Coffin Texts (Ciampini 2003). Each of these tombs had some special architectural features. The last tomb of Wahka II is the largest and most elaborate with three cult chapels at the very back. His causeway is the longest one having a bend with an additional gateway. In

general, the three big tombs resemble royal funerary complexes of the Old Kingdom.

In the burial chambers, sarcophagi belonging to these governors were found. The limestone sarcophagus of Ibu (Steckeweh 1936: pl. 16) is decorated with an elaborate palace façade and so far has no parallel in the Middle Kingdom.

The tombs were richly equipped with statues (fig. 4), some of them carved out of the rocks (Steckeweh 1936: pl. 2a). The chapels were decorated with fine reliefs surviving only in small fragments. In the tomb of Wahka II, paintings were also recorded. The ceiling of the great hall in this tomb was painted too and shows a great variety of different patterns arranged in a chessboard pattern (Steckeweh 1936: pl. 9). The wall paintings here are typical for tombs of the reigns of Senusret III and Amenemhat III, showing women at work and fecundity figures (fig. 5). Similar paintings were found at Meir in the tomb of Ukhhotep IV and are to be connected with new religious beliefs of the late 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (Franke 1991: 54 - 55). The tomb of Sobekhotep is the smallest (Petrie 1930: 9, pl. XV), though still a monument on a larger scale. No causeway is so far known. It was decorated with paintings, none of which



Figure 4. Fragment of a statue from the tomb of Wahka II. UC 31288.

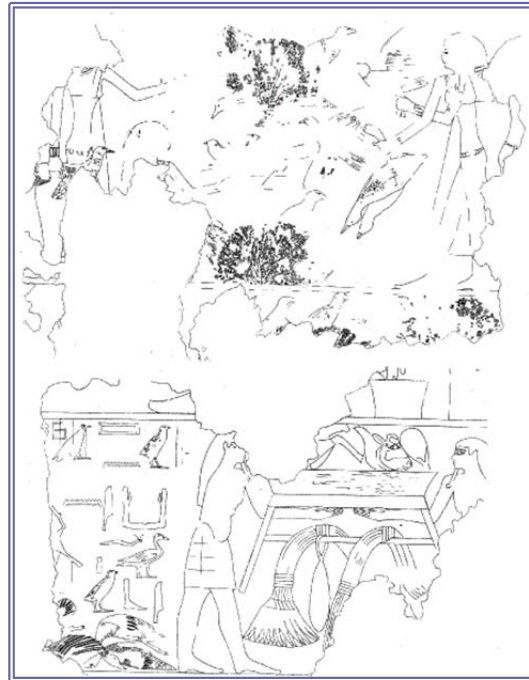


Figure 5. Painting from the tomb of Wahka II.

have been published yet. The name of Sobekhotep was copied by Petrie from the wall painting. A fragment of an offering table bears his name too (Steckeweh 1936: 9).

The date and sequence of the Middle Kingdom governors remains a problem (for a discussion, see Grajetzki 1997; for the titles, Favry 2004: 47 - 49; for the dating of Wahka II, see Martellière 2011). No king's name was found in any of the tombs. Only Wahka II had a son with the name Senusret-anekh (Steckeweh 1936: 7). Therefore the dating of the governors rests mainly on stylistic observations. The tombs of Wahka I and Ibu are the earlier ones. Especially the statue fragments found in the tomb of Ibu are datable to Amenemhat II and belong to the finest examples of Middle Kingdom private sculpture, perhaps made in a workshop that also produced royal sculpture (Fay 1996: 53 and n. 238; for several images of these sculptures, see D'Amicone 1988: 120 - 123,

figs. 161 - 166). Wahka I dates to about the same reign, but the sequence of both governors is not clear. Nakht is not attested by a separate tomb, but he is known from a wooden coffin lid and the filiations with his sons (Habachi 1977: 25 - 26; Leospo 1988). On the coffin lid he is simply called "mayor" (*h3ty*-). He might have been in office after Wahka I and Ibu. Wahka II, the son of Sobekdedu, was the owner of the largest tomb and dates, as recently could be shown, to Senusret III (Martellière 2011). This late date of Wahka II is supported by the style of his sculpture and the scenes in his tomb, mentioned above. As in other places, the line of big rock-cut tombs stopped under Senusret III. The exact date of Sobekhotep remains unknown. In Stockholm there is a stela showing a Wahka, begotten of Nakht, and dated by a cartouche of Amenemhat III (Ilin-Tomich 2011: 99; Steckeweh 1936: 7). He is evidently a third Wahka who was governor at Qau el-Kebir.



Further governors are no longer attested with their tombs, but from a range of other objects. Nemtynakht appears on an offering table (Petrie 1930: pl. XVII), while the names Ibu (II), Hetep, and Hetepuy were found on seals with the title “mayor of Tjebu” or “mayor (in) the Wadjet-nome” (Grajetzki 1997: 62; Martin 1971: 91, nos. 1159, 1163; Wegner 2010: 458).

Near the big rock-cut tombs of the governors are some smaller ones most likely belonging to officials working for the governors, although the exact date of the tombs remains unknown (Petrie 1930: pls. XV - XVI). Otherwise, not much is known about the cemeteries of the lower officials and common population of the Middle Kingdom. Pottery and other object types regarded as typical for this period are rare at the burial grounds around Qau el-Kebir in contrast to the many burials of the First Intermediate Period; relatively few can be assigned to the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. This problem was already noticed by Brunton (1930: 2). He discussed the option that the material culture, especially the pottery, was so conservative in the region that some burials of the First Intermediate Period might actually belong to the Middle Kingdom. A second option is the possibility that the population was buried on the west bank of the Nile, although that seems strange as the governors were buried on the east bank near the town (Dubiel 2008: 166 - 169). A third option is that the graves were located very close to the fertile land and ancient town, but have disappeared by now.

#### *Second Intermediate Period*

More burials are again known for the Second Intermediate Period. They are especially important for providing a pottery typology of Middle Egypt for the Second Intermediate Period. Several “pan-graves” were found (Bietak 1966: 72; Brunton 1930: 5 - 7, pls. IX - XI). In general, the burials of the period give a poor impression. Inscribed material is rare for this period.

#### *New Kingdom*

The burials of the New Kingdom sometimes reused older chambers, but there were still many surface burials. Burial goods comprise pottery vessels, amulets, and beads, including scarabs. There were many remains of wooden coffins. Shabtis are not common, but they do appear (Brunton 1930: 13 - 18, pls. XXII - XXIII).

There are some larger New Kingdom tombs. In one of them (1456), consisting of several underground chambers, the remains of the inscribed and decorated sarcophagus of the “governor” (*ḥꜣty-ꜥ*) May were discovered (Brunton 1930: pls. XXXVII, XXXVIA). The tomb was found close to those of the Middle Kingdom governors. May is also known from a statue, now in Berlin (fig. 6). According to the cartouches on the Berlin statue, he can be dated to Thutmose III. An uninscribed statue of a standing official (fig. 7), now in the Luxor Museum, was acquired at Qau el-Kebir. Both statues are close in style and both depict a man wearing the same necklace, known as the “gold of honor,” so it has been proposed that the statue in Luxor also represents May (Azzam 2005). The “gold of honor” is indeed mentioned in the text on the Berlin statue (Binder 2008: 309 [093]). The 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty stela of the “sailor of Nemty, lord of Tjebu” Wersu found at Qau el-Kebir supports the identification of the town with Tjebu (Steckeweh 1936: 53, pl. 17). Another stela found in tomb 400 shows the “mayor of Tjebu” adoring a hippopotamus (Brunton 1930: pls. XXXII, XXXIII). The inscription on the stela is not well preserved, but the name of this mayor might be Huy. From other sources, additional “mayors” of the period are known (Helck 1974: 97): Mentuherkhepeshef was buried at Thebes (TT20), and Wesertnub (Hayes 1951: fig. 18) appears on an ostrakon found at Malqata and datable to Amenhotep III.



Figure 6. Statue of May. Egyptian Museum Berlin Inv. No. 19286.



Figure 7. New Kingdom statue from Qau el-Kebir. Luxor Museum J. 1.

Exceptional New Kingdom finds at Qau el-Kebir include several massive deposits of objects made of hippopotamus ivory, most of them cosmetic items such as “kohl”-tubes, spoons, or mirror handles, some in the shape of female figures (fig. 8). These deposits were placed in older tombs (Brunton 1930: 18 - 20, pl. XXXVI). It has been argued that they can be connected with the cults of Seth and Nemywy (Brunton 1930: 20; Welvaert 2002).

### *Third Intermediate Period and Late Period*

There are few recorded tombs datable to the Third Intermediate Period and Late Period. In most examples the deceased were placed in anthropoid coffins, all found badly decayed. Pottery was no longer common, making the dating of single burials complicated. Some burials were richly equipped with amulets (Brunton 1930: 22 - 25, pls. XXXVIII - XXXIX).

*Ptolemaic and Roman Periods*

The only known monuments of the ancient town proper derive from the Ptolemaic Period. In the Ptolemaic temple at Qau el-Kebir, a text naming Ptolemy IV is recorded. Whether the king just added an inscription to an older temple or built a new one remains unknown. Later, Ptolemy VI Philometor built a pronaos to this temple consisting of three rows of six palm columns (fig. 9). The pronaos measured about 15.62 x 44.63 m and therefore belongs to the larger recorded ones. The names of Ptolemy VI and Cleopatra II appear on a Greek dedication inscription. A Greek inscription was added by the Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 164. The temple was placed within a big enclosure, measuring about 85 x 260 m and oriented parallel to the Nile. In the early nineteenth century, the limestone naos (fig. 10), once housing the cult statue, was still in place; perhaps it was once part of the sanctuary. It was about five meters high, the top as usual for this object type in the shape of a pyramid (Arnold 1999: 184 - 85; Sidhom 1988, Vol. IV: 38 - 40, text IV: 75 - 124).

The cemeteries of the 30<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and Ptolemaic Period are still substantial. There were many surface burials, but also shaft tombs. Several inscribed anthropoid sarcophagi (Brunton 1930: pl. XLVIII; Steckeweh 1936: 59 - 62, pl. 27) were discovered here. Many people were buried in clay coffins. A number of offering tables were found, and there are examples of mummy bandages with Hieratic texts, perhaps chapters of the *Book of the Dead* (Kockelmann 2008: 31). Animal cemeteries for dogs, perhaps dating to the late Ptolemaic Period, also existed (Brunton 1930: 25).

From the size of the cemeteries at Qau el-Kebir, it was clearly still a flourishing center in the Roman Period. At the edge of the fertile land close to the big Middle Kingdom tombs, a chain of small mud-brick chapels was erected; some of them contained burials and some were adorned with Roman style wall paintings showing the deceased, standing (Steckeweh 1930: 57 - 58, pls. 21 - 22). Finds



Figure 8. Fragment of a hippopotamus bone figure. UC 26085.

in burials of the period contain pottery vessels, glass vessels, jewelry, lamps, and sometimes cosmetic objects (Brunton 1930: 26 - 29).

*Excavation/Research History*

Early European travelers visited the remains of the Ptolemaic temple in the eighteenth century. A drawing and reconstruction of it was made for the *Description de l'Égypte* by the French Expedition in 1798 - 1801 (fig. 9). A century later there were several archaeological missions to the cemeteries of Qau el-Kebir. Ernesto Schiaparelli worked in the tombs of the Middle Kingdom governors in 1905/1906. A great number of finds, including many fragments of sculpture, reliefs, but also coffins and parts of burial equipment, were brought to the Egyptian Museum in Turin. However, the excavations were never fully published. Further research was undertaken by a German expedition under Hans Steckeweh in 1913/1914. The main target was once more the Middle Kingdom tombs of the local governors, but also parts of the Greek-Roman cemeteries nearby were investigated (Steckeweh 1936). In 1923/1924, William Matthew Flinders Petrie excavated

the governors' tombs again (Petrie 1930), as well as part of the cemeteries in the area. Petrie was working together with Guy Brunton, who uncovered several cemeteries in the region—from Qau el-Kebir in the south to Mostagedda in the north—from 1922 to 1931. As a result, Brunton published several thousand tombs belonging to almost all periods of Egyptian history. He presented his results in four volumes (Brunton 1927, 1928, 1930; Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928). Most graves are listed in tables, providing information on the types of objects found, but not on the number (for several identical

pots, just the type appears, not their number). The expedition avoided heavily looted and poor tombs (Brunton 1927: 4), leaving a gap in the archaeological records. Seidlmayer (1990: 206 - 209) has argued that most of these burials belonged to the farming population of the region. Even in a provincial town like Qau el-Kebir/Tjebu, a large part of the population must have been farmers. Therefore, the publications of Brunton remain the major source in Egyptian archaeology for burials in a provincial region and for the “common” population.



Figure 9. Pronaos of the Ptolemaic temple.

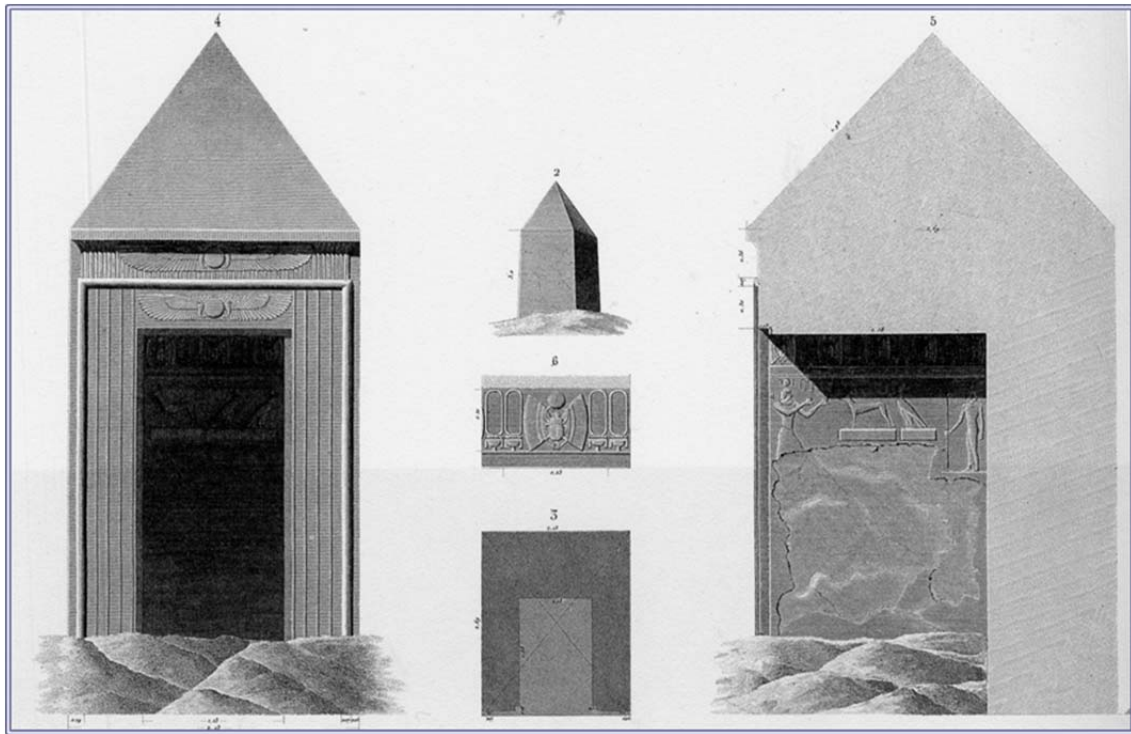


Figure 10. Naos of the Ptolemaic temple.

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- Figure 1. Map of Qau el-Kebir/Qau. (After Brunton 1927: pl. 1.)
- Figure 2. Early Dynastic staircase tomb. (After Brunton 1927: pl. XII, 5.)
- Figure 3. Plan of the tomb of Wahka I; brown: mud-bricks, yellow: stone. Drawing by the author. (After Steckeweh 1936: pls. I - II.)
- Figure 4. Fragment of a statue from the tomb of Wahka II. UC 31288. Courtesy of University College London.
- Figure 5. Painting from the tomb of Wahka II. (After Petrie 1930: pl. XXV.)
- Figure 6. Statue of May. Egyptian Museum Berlin Inv. No. 19286. Photograph by Lutz Franke.
- Figure 7. New Kingdom statue from Qau el-Kebir. Luxor Museum J. 1. Courtesy of Dr. Karl Leser.
- Figure 8. Fragment of a hippopotamus bone figure. UC 26085. Courtesy of University College London.
- Figure 9. Pronaos of the Ptolemaic temple. (After Sidhom 1988, Vol. IV: fig. 40.)
- Figure 10. Naos of the Ptolemaic temple. (After Sidhom 1988, Vol. IV: fig. 38.)