

Coptic occupation of the Theban Mountain

Guy Lecuyot

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Coptic occupation of the Theban Mountain

Several research teams (Belgian, German, Polish and French) are currently investigating sites formerly occupied by Copts on the west bank of Thebes. A small team, under the auspices of the French Institute in Cairo (IFAO) has been studying Coptic remains in the southern part of the Theban Mountain, as summarised by **Guy Lecuyot**.

Despite the survival of some architectural remains and the discovery over the years (during excavation work) of numerous textual documents, notably ostraca, our knowledge of the Coptic Period on the west bank of Thebes still remains quite fragmentary and limited. This part of the Theban mountain, which in the Byzantine Period was under the control of Armant and the main town of which was Djeme, seems to have been Christianised rather late. The religious edifices situated on the 'Mountain of Djeme' seems to have flourished between the sixth and eighth centuries, but within this period it is quite difficult to reconstitute the different stages of their development.

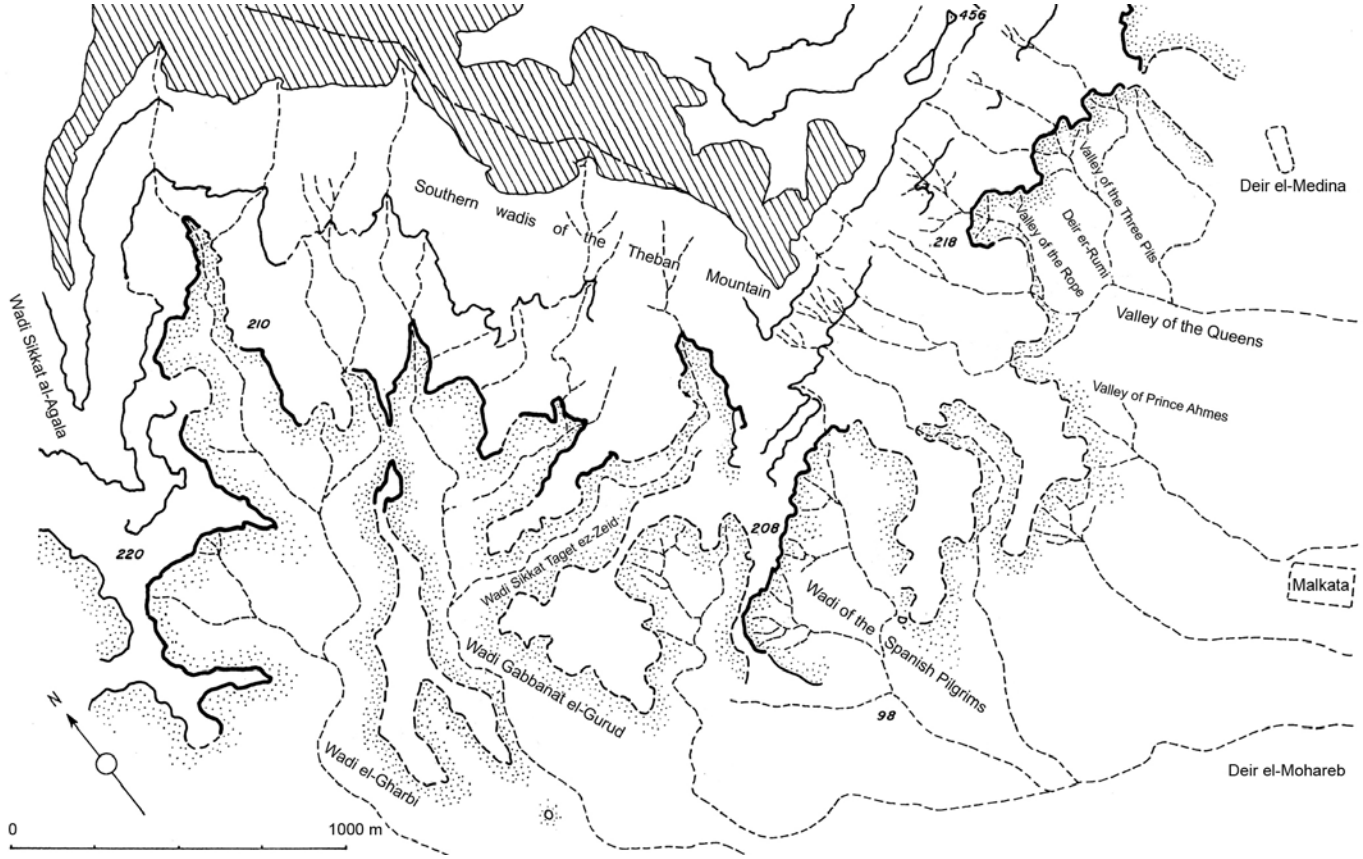
Even today, several place names lead us to believe that no fewer than six monasteries occupied the space between the northern and southern limits of the area (Deir el-Shelwit, Deir el-Mohareb, Deir er-Rumi, Deir el-Medina, Deir el-Bahri and Deir el-Bakhit), but what do we really know about them? Their names are modern, and their ancient names are not known. In the texts these places are referred to by various words: *topos*, *monasterion*, *ekklesia*, and even *laura*, but we do not know which is which. Two monasteries are attested in the documentary record: the Monastery of Phoibammon which has been identified at Deir el-Bahri, and the Monastery of Paul, whose location, unfortunately, still remains unknown.

Between 2004 and 2007, as part of the IFAO mission, a small team composed of Catherine Thirard, Alain Delattre and the writer set out to survey the southern *wadi*s of the Theban Mountain, from the Valley of the Queens to the Wadi Sikkat el-Agala, in search of remains dating from the Coptic Period. Our survey covered the Wadi of the Spanish Pilgrims, Wadi Gabbanat el-Gurud, Wadi Sikkat Taget ez-Zeid and Wadi el-Gharbi.

The *wadi*s situated around the Valley of the Queens (Valley of the Three Pits, Valley of the Rope, the Valley of Prince Ahmes) constitute a coherent geographical ensemble: the cavities that have been located there (which probably served as shelters or retreat cells for hermits) no doubt belonged to the same monastic ensemble. The Deir er-Rumi (see cover photograph), situated at the entrance to the Valley of the Queens between the Valley of the Three Pits and the Valley of the Rope, seems indeed to have been the central element of a *laura*. In the necropolis, old tombs were manifestly put to new use, such as tombs 1, 58, 60 and 73 in the Valley of the Queens. In the *wadi* further to the south other remains have been located. These can be identified especially



View of the southern part of the Theban Mountain with, in the foreground, the Deir el-Mohareb



Map of the southern area of the Theban Mountain with the locations of the Valley of the Queens and other wadis *mentioned in the text*



View of the entrance to the small 'chapel' C' 7 situated above the Valley of the Queens



Ceramics found in front of shelter C 9 situated above the Valley of the Spanish Pilgrims



Entrance to shelter C 9 situated above the Valley of the Spanish Pilgrims

by ceramic accumulations which were found in front of more or less structured cavities. Most of these caves are simple holes or faults closed by small stone or unbaked brick walls. The inner walls often contain niches and are plastered with *mouna* (mud). The function of these cavities and their links with a monastic centre remain the subject of conjecture and require further study.



Graffito engraved on the external walls of the small 'chapel' C7 situated in the Valley of the Spanish Pilgrims, mentioning 'a chore for the Lord'

What was the purpose of these places of retreat? Were they permanently occupied or simply used for short stays? The abundant ceramics found on site and their nature (often including Late Roman amphorae, fragments of cooking pots, sherds of tableware, mostly Aswan ware, and some decorated sherds) clearly indicate that people lived there.

In 2007, a small sounding was carried out to the west of the Deir er-Rumi and brought to light some economically significant ostraca which complete the series found in 1994. They bear witness to the involvement of the monasteries in the social and economic life of the region.



Graffito representing a holy character engraved on the rocky wall near the shelter referred to as 'the shelter of the lying man'

Parallel to this work, a study of the Coptic graffiti in this part of the Mountain was conducted by Alain Delattre and no fewer than 291 graffiti were identified. These graffiti are rarely directly linked to the 'cells' and point rather to visits made to these *wadi*s. Two sites (C 7 and C' 7) seem to occupy a special place, and they may have been small chapels, possibly the destination of some sort of pilgrimages to the Mountain.

These two sites, C7 and C' 7, are small in size, but they are better finished than the others as they have fine plastering. More particularly, on the outside they are surrounded by numerous graffiti engraved in the rock.

These graffiti comprise invocations, signatures - in particular the names of Apa (holy men) from other regions in Egypt - lists of names, drawings of human characters, animals, crosses, etc. Also, of particular interest, located outside the C 7 site, is a praying figure bearing overhead the inscription ⲁⲡⲁ ⲁⲙⲙⲟⲛⲓⲟⲥ 'Apa Ammonios'; this is somewhat reminiscent of the beautiful representation of Ammonios drawn in red paint at the entrance to the tomb of Ramesses IV in the Valley of the Kings (KV 2). We can also see unusual inscriptions relating to the 'chores' carried out for the Lord in the case of C7, and four short psalmic inscriptions in site C' 7.

The publication of the data collected during our field work is being prepared and should contribute to our knowledge of the occupation of the Theban Mountain during the Coptic Period. In January 2009 a colloquium organised at the IFAO in Cairo on the theme of hermit cells provided the opportunity to compare our data with those observed at other sites. We hope our findings will contribute to a better understanding of the development of religious sites in this part of Egypt which are still poorly understood.

❑ Guy Lecuyot is an architect and archaeologist with the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (UMR 8546 CNRS-ENS). He is very grateful to his collaborators on the project: Alain Delattre (FNRS, Brussels) and Catherine Thirard (University of Lyon II). Photographs by the writer. See further: www.ifao.egnet.net/archeologie/montagne-thebaine/