

Asyut - centre of ancient trade

Egyptian town Asyut must have been an important place on the map of the trade centres that took part in exchange already in the Antiquity.

The city situated c. 375 km to the south of Cairo, on midway between two ancient Egyptian capitals Memphis (in the North) and Thebes (in the South), – geographically and literally in the heart of ancient Egypt – was a political and cultural centre of Middle Egypt since the First Intermediate Period (c. 2100 BCE) at the latest, and remained such to the decline of the Pharaonic epoch.

The city formed a part of the cultural memory of Ancient Egypt and had a strategic importance thanks to its geographic location. Moreover, during the Byzantine and Islamic Periods, Asyut played, and still plays, an important superregional role in Christianity.

For the Pharaonic Period and Late Antiquity, the role of Asyut as a centre of merchandise became well-defined thanks the most recent research already done by the project applicants on Gebel Asyut al-gharbi.

The aim of the project is to clarify the role of Asyut as a hub of trade during Pharaonic and Byzantine Periods (*i.e.* 3rd millennium BCE to 1st millennium CE) as well as to reveal what factors had shaped these trade in particular historical epochs.

To achieve this goal, archaeologists plan to excavate the so-called Byzantine building, which could have given access to the Darb el-Arba'in rout (the famous *Forty Days Rout*) towards the Western desert, to survey selected areas on Gebel Asyut al-gharbi – an ancient necropolis situated to the west of modern Asyut and to study objects. Especially important is pottery, moreover plant and faunal (molluscs) remains as well as textiles. Planned methodology involves for pottery the formal (typological) analysis, comparative and statistical studies as well as petrographic analysis and chemical tests (GC/MS) that may help to identify various organic substances within a sample extracted from a vessel such as fats (animal and vegetable), wine, resins, etc. As to the textile material, the work assumes identifying raw materials, weaves and decorative patterns that would allow identification of the type of workshop domestic/professional, local/imports). Portable technologies such as multispectral imaging (MSI) and fibre optic reflectance spectroscopy (FORS) might be applied in order to identify the dyes. Further analyses concern Greek and Coptic *dipinti* on Roman and Byzantine amphorae. Of special importance are studies on the history of Asyut through the millennia with a special focus on cultural contact. Information and data concerning Asyut from the 4th Millennium BCE to the end of the 1st millennium CE will be collected and will be combined with the results of the above-mentioned case studies.

The project will reconstruct the exchange of goods between Asyut and different countries/regions in Europe, Africa and Asia. It will show how closely connected the world was from the 2nd millennium BCE at the latest to the 1st millennium CE. It will help to understand the driving forces, the mechanism, and the consequences of the exchange of goods. The *longue durée* of the research subject will allow showing whether and how different religious and social environments in the same city had influence on international relations.

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With its interdisciplinary approach, the project will achieve results of a transdisciplinary interest in respect to archaeology, trade, economy, and urban history.

By the powerful bundling of the German expertise of fifteen years of archaeological fieldwork at Asyut as well as the German deep knowledge of Asyut's history with the proven Polish specialisation in pottery, the German-Polish cooperation can achieve synergies to benefit both sides.