

Home life in uncertain times.

Third Intermediate Period houses and households in Egypt after the fall of an empire

1. Research objectives

Reconstructing houses and domestic life in Third Intermediate Period Egypt lies at the heart of the project. These topics are relatively well studied for earlier periods of Egyptian history, but little is known about the daily life of Egyptians after the fall of the New Kingdom empire (16th–12th century BCE). The Third Intermediate Period (12th–7th century BCE) is politically an extremely turbulent time. One of the general objectives of the project is to see how regular everyday life was affected by the circumstances of this new, very uncertain world. The source base for this research are the houses from Tell el-Retaba, a large site in north-eastern Egypt. This data will be compared with evidence from a number of other settlement sites dating to this period. The planned research will encompass two main study categories: houses and households.

The study of houses will start with a theoretical reconstruction of the plan and form based on archaeological and iconographic sources. Depictions of houses in art will provide essential data for recreating the non-existent parts of these buildings, such as roofs and windows. Next, research will address the issue of form: why were Egyptian houses built in this particular form? Research on house architecture from different parts of the world has repeatedly shown different factors at play, shaping the form in an effort to adapt it to climate, as well as, primarily, to various cultural and social factors. Identifying these factors with regard to Third Intermediate Period housing is a key research goal. The relation of space to those living within it will be shown through a sensorial analysis. Examination of thermal performance as well as location of hearths will indicate which rooms were warmer and which cooler. House reconstruction will identify the parts of the house open to daylight. Analyses of the space syntax inside these houses should help to distinguish the more private areas from those where guests were welcomed.

Various aspects of domestic life will be researched as the second main objective. A variety of data sources will reflect on the family social structure, the changes that occurred in it and the reasons for the transformations. An important goal in this part of the project will be a holistic reconstruction of household economy, looking at diet and food procurement and processing strategies within a domestic context, as well as tool production. Religious practices performed in a household will also be studied.

2. Research

A multidisciplinary approach to the research is planned, both on site at Tell el-Retaba and in the main research fields. Architectural studies of houses will bring together iconographic data, the results of a sensorial approach (sources of sounds and smells), the spatial syntax (methodology derived from architecture and social psychology), small finds distribution, archaeobotanical and archaeozoological outcome and ceramological and petrographic research.

3. Reasons for undertaking the subject

Broadly understood settlement archaeology is still an understudied field in the research on Ancient Egyptian culture despite individual projects carried out over the past few dozen years. The present project will contribute significantly to closing the gap in this kind of research compared to other regions of the ancient world, giving a detailed look at the everyday life of the Ancient Egyptian population. The application of the principles of sensorial archaeology and spatial syntax studies will offer an innovative approach to the subject. In turn, the excavation outcomes at Tell el-Retaba, focused on the Third Intermediate Period strata, will illuminate one of the least investigated epochs in Egyptian history.