

The Aga Khan Necropolis at West Aswan

Discovery, Ongoing Excavation, and Heritage Protection Strategies

Patrizia Piacentini, Massimiliana Pozzi

An emergency excavation in an extraordinary setting

On the western bank of the Nile in Aswan, opposite the southern tip of Elephantine Island, stands the mausoleum of the Aga Khan. The monument dominates a desert area of exceptional historical and scenic value. In ancient times, there were quarries here for the extraction of sandstone, marl, granite, and quartzite, as well as the starting points of caravan routes leading to the oases. In the 6th-7th centuries, the Coptic monastery of Anba Hatra/St. Simeon was built. Archaeological evidence also suggested the presence of a necropolis in the area.

In 2015, to counter the threat of illegal excavations, the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the University of Aswan launched emergency excavations in the area. Three years later, the Egyptian-Italian Mission at West Aswan (EIMAWA) was established, directed by Patrizia Piacentini of the University of Milan, in collaboration with the Director General of Antiquities of the Aswan Governorate, with the aim of carrying out systematic excavations and studies, conservation, and enhancement of the "Aga Khan Necropolis."

Ten years after the start of the work, the site remains a highly critical archaeological context for preservation, given its vastness and distance from inhabited areas. The area investigated so far covers approximately 200,000 m², where approximately 500 tombs have been identified through surveys, 39 of which have already been scientifically excavated. Topographical clues and archaeological evidence suggest that the necropolis extends over a similar area south of the Aga Khan mausoleum.

The activities currently underway aim both to document as comprehensively as possible structures that would otherwise be at risk of irreversible loss and to reconstruct the state of the necropolis before clandestine interventions in the modern era or damage caused by atmospheric phenomena, through the analysis of historical accounts, archival documentation, and old photographs.



Fig. 1: View of the Aga Khan necropolis from the Nile



Fig. 2: Mummified bodies rearranged within tomb AGH036



Fig. 3: Virtual reconstruction and repositioning of limestone coffin from tomb AGH038

Site protection measures

Since 2019, when systematic excavations began, various forms of protection have been implemented: permanent surveillance, provided by guards who constantly monitor the area with regular patrols and by checking the condition of the necropolis using satellite photographs; installation of a temporary lighting system that has expanded the one already in place at the new monastery of San Simeon and which could be developed in the future into a sustainable solar-powered system; protection of the excavated tombs by closing them with iron doors reinforced externally with local stone blocks. This last measure is also motivated by the desire to achieve sustainable storage of the large quantity of fragmentary and non-diagnostic ceramic finds, which for this reason are not transported to the Aswan Inspectorate's warehouse, and to leave as many human remains as possible inside the tombs. In fact, after proteomic and isotopic analysis and medical-anthropological study—conducted in situ or by computed tomography at the Aswan University Hospital—the mummified bodies are returned to their respective tombs, which have been cleaned and tidied up after damage caused by ancient thieves, weather events, and the infiltration of sand and debris. The aim is to give them a dignified burial, in line with the Mission's code of ethics. Only individuals covered by cartonnage still in place, or of a particular scientific interest, are transferred to a specially designated and equipped room at the Inspectorate, accessible only for research purposes.

The exposure of architectural elements previously protected by sand has also highlighted the fragility of the mud-brick structures, which requires specific conservation and restoration work, as well as covering those most at risk with sheets and sand.

All activities are carried out in close collaboration with the Egyptian authorities, within a program that integrates scientific research and heritage protection.



Fig. 4: View of the plateau with the entrances of the tombs AGH003, AGH004, AGH012, and AGH038

The project for the management and enhancement of the site

The excavation has revealed tombs of various types, varying in size depending on the conformation of the area in which they are dug, the date, and the social status of the occupying family. The main differentiation is between the underground tombs on the plateau and the rock tombs on multiple terraces, with front mud-brick enclosures.

The future visitor route will allow visitors to safely explore the most significant areas of the necropolis, with dedicated information panels to help them understand the structures and find their way around. Visitors can already enjoy the extraordinary natural spectacle offered by the site. Accessibility to the funerary structures will be determined on the basis of their state of preservation and size: some, with very low ceilings, will only be visible from the outside; in others, it will be possible to look into the vestibule and glimpse the adjoining chambers, which are lit in an evocative manner; only in some cases will it be possible to explore the interior of the tombs. At the entrance to the site, there will be a reception area with commented 3D projections offering the public the opportunity to virtually enter the tombs that cannot be visited and to associate architecture and artifacts in a scientifically rigorous immersive experience.

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