

THE GOVERNOR'S PALACES AT AYN ASIL/BALAT (DAKHLA OASIS/WESTERN DESERT)

by Clara Jeuthe

Introduction (Fig. 1)

The area of Balat is situated at the eastern edge of the Dakhla Oasis, approximately 250–280 km from the Nile Valley (Balat – Dara area). It contains several sites, which have been investigated from 1978 onwards by the *Institut français d'archéologie orientale* (IFAO). The most prominent features dating to the Pharaonic period include the necropolis (Qila° el-Dabba) and the occupation area (Ayn Asil). The latter site has two main enclosures, occupied from approximately the late Old Kingdom to the early Middle Kingdom (approx. 2350–2000 BC). The two enclosures are now recognised as forming a provincial palace. Full publication of the recent excavations is currently underway,¹ but the initial results will be presented here, focussing on the residential area of the late 6th Dynasty, and giving an introduction into the main characteristics of the later phases.²

Looking at the building history at Ayn Asil in its entirety, one of its main characteristics is immediately obvious: the extremely fast and intensive development of the various precincts and occupation activities during the 6th Dynasty, while only a few additions are known so far that date from the late reign of Pepi II into the early Middle Kingdom. The oldest known occupation is the northern enclosure, also sometimes referred to as the “fortress”, dating back to the early 6th Dynasty (Fig.1). A smaller precinct was set against it to the northwest, but all other extensions are found to the south. Here, directly south of the gate, a shallowly preserved complex was added with its own precinct wall (1st southern extension), and shortly afterwards was extended with another precinct wall (2nd southern extension).

During the reign of Pepi II the second large feature, the southern enclosure, was built against the earlier structures. The last known extension was set against the southern enclosure to the west. This was built during the late Old Kingdom, and its precise function is currently unknown. After a gap during which no buildings are known to have existed, although there were a pond and various channels, the area was resettled in the late Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period. A few ceramics dating to the New Kingdom have been found on the surface but no associated structures are preserved; further remains of this date are known from the northern enclosure.³

The northern enclosure: the first palace at Ayn Asil?

From the initial research by L. Giddy and from later investigations mainly carried out by D. Schaad, the northern enclosure, which is approximately 171 m N/S in size, may date back to the early 6th Dynasty. After reinforcement during the middle of the 6th Dynasty, the enclosure wall was almost 4 m wide and four towers were added, facing to the south (Fig.1). However, as impressive as the fortified architecture appeared, it only lasted a short while. Not only the southern extensions, but also settlement structures to the west were built against the precinct and its towers shortly after their construction. But because of the accumulation of sand to the north, it was only possible to extend further on the south side as described above. Thus it was more important to extend the occupation area rather than maintain the fortified appearance of the enclosure. Its final date of use is difficult to establish due to the poor preservation of the youngest layers, but may fall into the First Intermediate Period.⁴

¹ For the palace of the late 6th Dynasty: SOUKIASSIAN in preparation; for the northern enclosure: SCHAAD in preparation. As this article is based in large parts on the results of their work, I owe them both special thanks, and also to L. Pantalacci who is in charge of the study of the epigraphic material and to V. Le Provost for the ceramics.

² Cf. the recent publication of the initial results including further bibliographical references important for the First Intermediate Period and the early Middle Kingdom at Ayn Asil: JEUTHE *et al.* 2014.

³ SOUKIASSIAN *et al.* 2002, 9–13; cf. SOUKIASSIAN *et al.* 1990; MARCHAND and SOUKIASSIAN 2010; MARCHAND and TALLET 1999; OSING *et al.* 1982, 33f., 36f.

⁴ SCHAAD in preparation, cf. also SOUKIASSIAN *et al.* 1990, 350–52, 355–358 and SMITH and GIDDY 1985 as introduction to the work relevant to the northern enclosure. Note, however, that according to current studies these initial reports are not valid anymore for all points, in particular for the dates.

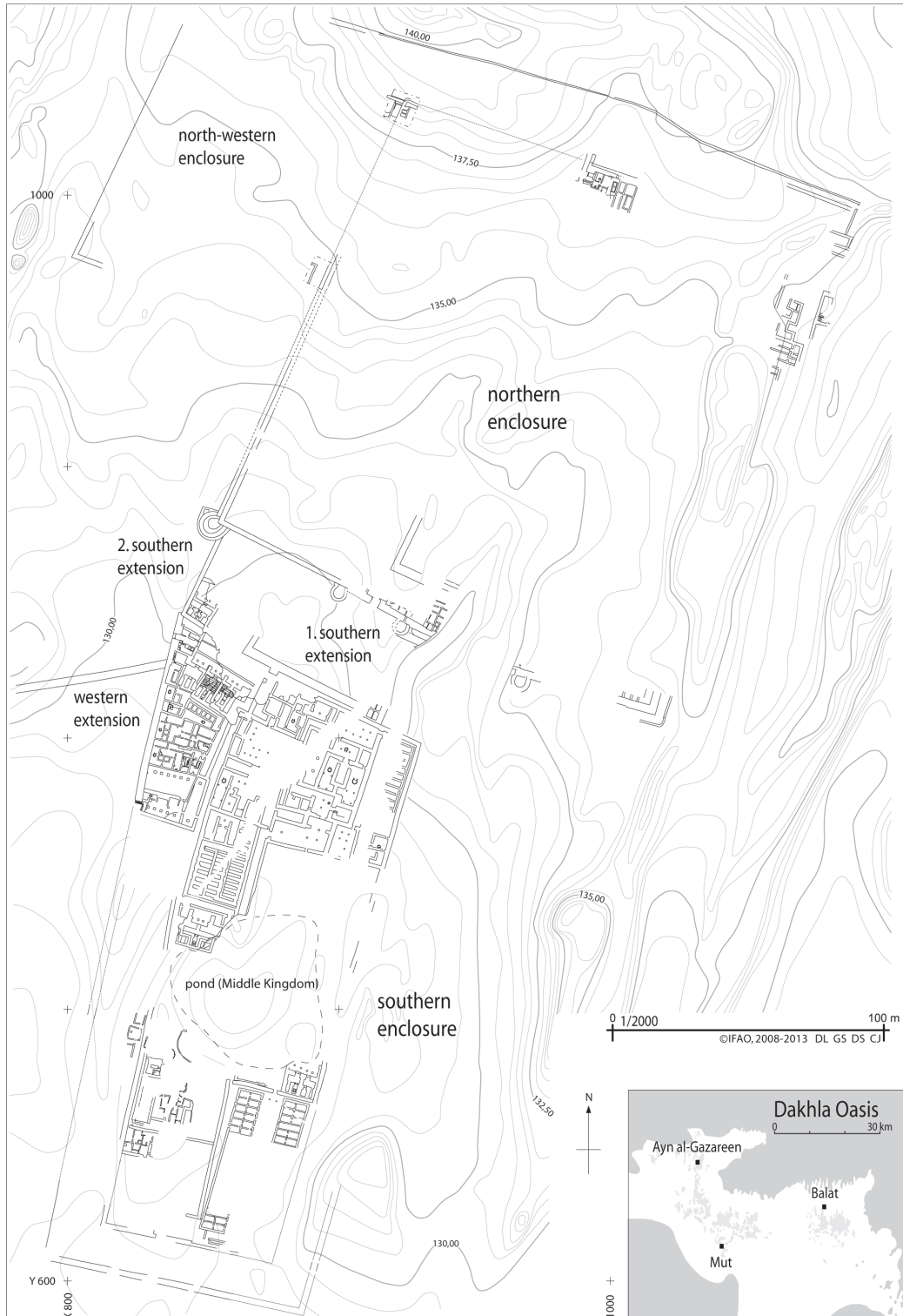


Fig. 1 Enclosures and precincts at Ayn Asil (after LAISNEY 2010, figs. 13, 16)

Hence, the northern and southern enclosures were in use contemporaneously for an indeterminate span of time. It seems that the southern enclosure was not planned as a replacement for the northern enclosure but as an enlargement of it. Still, its construction may have influenced and changed the general function of the northern enclosure.

Up to the present, the general development of the northern enclosure and its extensions are the best understood areas, but less is known of its inner structures and possible main functions. However, certain indications suggest that the northern enclosure – or at least part of it – served as a palace. In its early use, at least four governors are known to have been contemporaneous with the northern enclosure and to predate the construction of the southern one.⁵ From this it appears only logical that their residence was inside the northern enclosure, as no other building of a similar date is known. Further evidence for this is found on a lintel inscribed with the full title of the governor of the oasis, dating presumably to the reign of Pepi I. Its size and style clearly echo other lintels known only from the Hwt-Ka chapels at Ayn Asil. A few relatively small limestone column bases, found in a disturbed area with fragments of two statues, are paralleled only in the column bases in the same chapels.⁶ Finally, the Hwt-Ka chapel no. 4 is built into the second southern extension and may predate the construction of the southern enclosure.⁷

The southern enclosure: the governor's palace (Figs. 2–8)

The southern enclosure of Ayn Asil, known as the „governor's palace“, is largely excavated. It is mainly founded on virgin soil, and is trapezoidal in shape, being 216–242 m N/S × 100 m E/W at its maximum extension. The southern enclosure was well protected against the accumulation of sand by the earlier structures. Its development falls into three main architectural phases. The oldest dates from the reign of Pepy II to the end of the Old Kingdom in the late 6th Dynasty/early 8th Dynasty, and is connected with at least three governors. Phase II belongs mainly to the First Intermediate Period, and the following Phase III is slightly shorter, starting in the 11th Dynasty and running into the beginning of the 12th Dynasty.⁸

⁵ Personal communication: G. Soukiassian; Y. Gourdon.

⁶ SOUKIASSIAN 2013, 65f.

⁷ SOUKIASSIAN *et al.* 2002, 85–88.

⁸ JEUTHE *et al.* 2014, 203.

Phase I: the residence of the late Old Kingdom (Figs. 2–6)

From its beginning, the palace had a strict arrangement of functional areas: in its northern half were the residential complex, which included storage facilities, and the Hwt-Ka area, and in the southern part were mainly magazines and preparation areas (Fig. 2). Two precinct walls, an inner and an outer, with a gate in the northwest and probably a second one in the south are part of the original plan. The space between the walls was soon occupied by the Hwt-Ka chapels nos. 1–3 and their supply complex. A long street, running north to south, is attested at least in the final stage of Phase I.⁹ The different areas inside the inner precinct, as well as the individual groups of rooms, are connected by a complex system of corridors and courtyards, in most cases avoiding direct access. A large courtyard in the central area served as the main connection between the northern and southern parts. A later pond cutting into this area may hint at a similar water access point at an earlier time here.

The palace underwent various modifications and rearrangements during Phase I, but these were mainly restricted to particular groups of rooms. As a result, some areas were adjusted several times while others hardly changed, except for a few minor alterations. However, the best documented stage (and therefore the one presented here) is that at the end of Phase I, as only limited information exists for the earlier ones. Because it is heavily affected by fire, the last stage offers both a large number of objects found *in situ* and also well preserved architectural details, such as the impressions of the wooden doors and beams on the floors. Fire damage was seen in various areas in the palace, and the pattern of burning suggests that it was not accidental, as an accidental fire would have spread with the wind. Instead, the evidence of destruction is found mainly in the important rooms and doorways. Other areas do not show any traces of destruction, but would have shown them if the fire had spread naturally.

Entering the palace complex by the northwestern gate, the route passes the Hwt-Ka chapels nos. 1–3 and their supply annex, leading to the long north-south street and from there to the residential area inside the inner precinct (Fig. 3). The residential area is divided into two major zones, designated the eastern and the western apartment, and covers in its final stage an area of 2500 sq.m.¹⁰ The eastern

⁹ Cf. SOUKIASSIAN *et al.* 2002, 37–198.

¹⁰ SOUKIASSIAN in preparation; cf. JEUTHE *et al.* 2014, 204; cf. SOUKIASSIAN 1997.



Fig. 2 The governor's palace at the end of the Old Kingdom (with reconstructions)

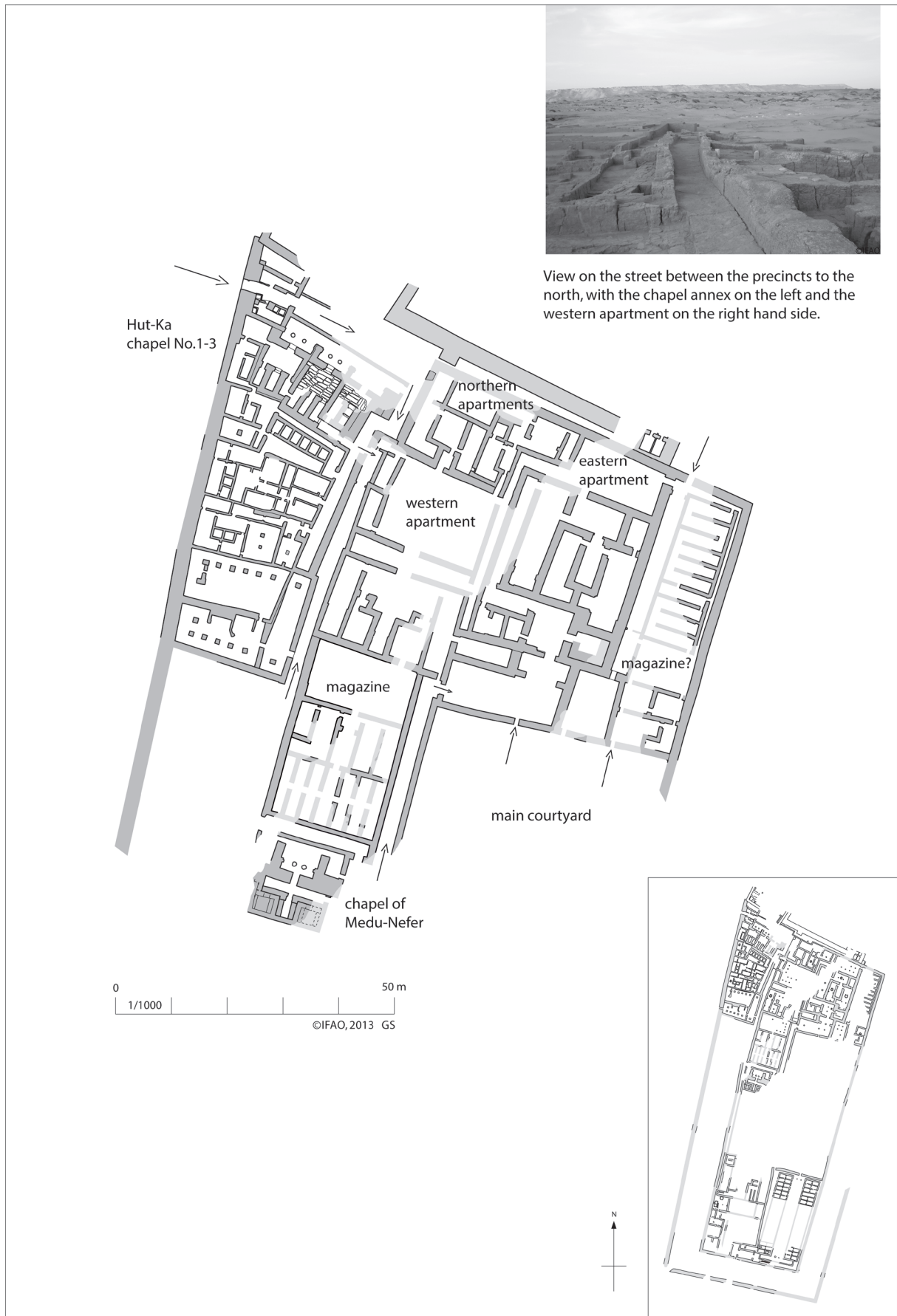


Fig. 3 Key plan of the residence at the end of the Old Kingdom (with reconstructions)

apartment, the more ancient and larger of the two, has an area of 1260 sq.m. and two further entrances, one from outside the inner precinct to the northeast and another from the main courtyard to the south. The gate at the northeast led to the pillared hall E1, which may have served as the main entrance hall and also as the direct access route to the western apartment (Fig. 4). Various fragments of lists composed largely of names demonstrate its role in the administrative system. Hall E1 also led to room E3 and from there to the central room group E4–7. Room E3, which contained a hearth and traces of wooden doors, is the only attested connection between the two routes leading to the central room group. Apart from the just-mentioned route via hall E1, room E3 led southwards via E8–16 to the main courtyard. Room E12, also with a hearth and the remains of wooden doors, may have had a similar function to room E3, i.e. controlling access. Moreover only E12 gave access via the massive staircase in E14 to possible further rooms above. The complex system of strictly divided routes, including various corridors, transit rooms and halls accompanied by small storage areas, highlights the importance of control of access to and thus the intimate character of the central group E4–7. Finally, an adjunct complex with two entrances is located in the eastern periphery of the apartment. However, its poor state of preservation does not permit easy interpretation. The most likely reconstruction hints at storage facilities, and also to preparation and organisation of goods especially in its southern rooms. However, from its position the complex is undoubtedly related to the eastern apartment, especially as direct access to it is given by hall E1.

The central rooms form an individual unit with two rectangular rooms of slightly different dimensions (E5, E7), each one with a recess. The larger room (E5) was accompanied by a small chamber (E6). Both rectangular rooms are connected by a small courtyard in between (E4) and through this they are only accessible via room E3. Rooms E5 and E7 are similar, with a hearth placed in the centre of the room, as is frequently seen in the “living rooms” in Ayn Asil. More specifically, in both rooms four carefully shaped rectangular stone bases form a rectangle of 5×3 m / 3.9×2.9 m. This construction is strongly reminiscent of the base of a canopy, as seen in the tomb decoration of the later governor Betju (Fig. 5).¹¹ In that scene, the canopy

covers the seat of the governor, and this is also a likely reconstruction for the residence. However, the fact that two rooms show the same feature denies the existence of one permanent “throne room”.

Moreover, seal impressions prove that room E5 was frequently sealed, i.e. shut and reopened. E7 may have been open but as no traces of fire damage are visible here, it seems not to have been in use at the end of Phase I. By contrast, E5 was destroyed on a large scale. The whole ensemble points to a complex reality with a formal, albeit not necessarily permanent arrangement, and perhaps not to a single function for the individual rooms. A parallel may be seen in “Building C” at Ayn al-Gazareen, dating roughly to the 6th Dynasty. Building C consists of two similar interlocking rooms, each leading into a rectangular chamber in the central part. In the centre of both of the L-shaped rooms was a pit filled with ashes. Apart from some fragments of fine bowls on the floor, the building was kept clean of settlement debris. An impression from a button seal showing a royal bee, originally placed on the door bolt, also highlights the importance of the building.¹² The architecture, though strictly formal, differs from that at Ayn Asil and as yet a final interpretation is not possible. However, the example indicates that formal architecture cannot be related to a specific individual purpose but merely allows a general interpretation as “official”. Furthermore, both the arrangements in Ayn Asil and in Ayn al-Gazareen raise the possibility of only occasional use, hinting at a system far too complex to be understood from our archaeological data.

The western apartment, covering an area of 880 sq.m., resembles the eastern apartment in its main features, the central rooms W8–15, the access control room W7 and the pillared hall W5, but differs markedly in the details of its arrangement (Fig. 6). Three entrances are known. To the northwest the corridors W2/3 allowed entry from the street outside the inner precinct and therefore to the Hwt-Ka area and the northwestern entrance of the palace complex. To the northeast, corridor W1 opened into E2 and hence to the eastern apartment. Finally, corridor W16/17 connected the western apartment with the main courtyard and also again with the eastern apartment. However, the access to the central room group W8–15 was still controlled, but in a less complex arrangement than seen in the eastern apartment.

¹¹ The tomb has not been published yet but cf. VALLOGIA 2004, 166f., fig. 194; AUFRÈRE 2000, 41–44.

¹² MILLS and KAPER 2003, 127–129, fig.1; cf. MILLS 2001, 18f.; MILLS 2007, 3–7.



Fig. 4 The eastern apartment in its burnt state, with burnt areas on the floor in grey

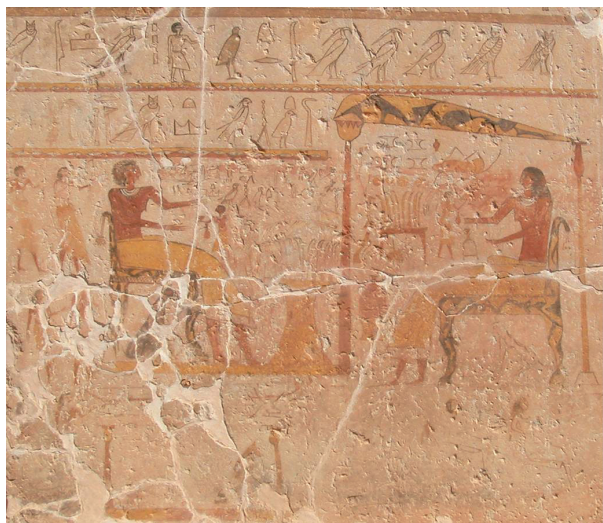


Fig. 5 Tomb of Betju, western wall (© IFAO)

In the central room group, there is only a single rectangular room (W14) with a hearth and four stone bases for a canopy of approx. 5×2.7 m, and it is accessible from the at least partly covered courtyard W8. Situated to its south is an arrangement of small rooms (W9–13) which does not resemble any structure in the eastern apartment. The central room W9 is in on the same axis as the entrances of W5 and W8 and therefore is the clear focus of the architectural arrangement, and particularly to the recess at the end of the room, which is separated off by a wooden partition panel but is still accessible by a step. Shallow holes in the floor point to the position of small vessels. However, its purpose remains unknown as no specific objects were found inside or close by it. There is better evidence for the function of the neighbouring rooms. W10/11 seem to be connected with the storage of precious goods, which can be deduced from the remains of a sealed crate placed inside, and also from the written evidence found just outside it. W12/13, however, provides the only entrance to the adjoining large magazine area south of the central rooms. While this room group was only poorly preserved, traces of destruction by fire are well attested in W8–11 and W14.

The courtyard W5, which had colonnades around its sides, appears to have had an administrative purpose, to judge from the written evidence found here. This in particular dealt with the supply of provisions to different groups of persons, including both workmen and high officials. Furthermore, W5 was the only entrance to the northern complex which contained two small apartments, together covering

an area of 334 sq.m. Both seem to have had a domestic purpose, and the only attested kitchen and bakery in the residential part is located in this complex (N6, N7).

In summary, both apartments resemble each other in their main arrangements, but differ markedly in details. It has to be noted that the eastern apartment was constructed at the beginning of Phase I and did not undergo any changes in its architecture until its destruction by fire, whereas the western apartment was built only at the final stage, although it seems to have replaced a similar earlier structure. The magazine adjoining to the western apartment is also a renewal of an earlier storage area, in this case even with double vaulted magazines. Therefore, the tradition of two apartments might be rather ancient: the eastern apartment with its complex arrangement including the possible storage facilities on its periphery on the one side and on the other side the western apartment with the strong focus on storage and the administration of the distribution of goods and provisions. Both parts, however, have to be understood as a single complex. It needs to be stressed, though, that, as tempting as it would be to identify the western apartment as, for example, “the” administrative centre or the eastern one as “the” representative area, the reality is far more complex. The insight provided by the architectural evidence on its own may well be misleading. In the case of the central rooms, the canopy may be misunderstood as indicative of the main room of a governor; however, the existence of three such rooms complicates the picture, in particular when taking the differences in arrangement and frequency of use into consideration. Even with our limited knowledge of the organisation, processes and daily work routine inside a palace, areas designated for just one specific purpose can be discounted. Although the distribution of objects, and in particular the written evidence, often indicates a main activity for specific rooms, it does not describe an exclusive purpose but rather names a few of them. As yet, no specific type of administrative evidence has been found restricted to a specific area, rather such evidence has appeared in other areas in comparably low quantity.¹³ Despite the good conditions of preservation with most of

¹³ The study of the epigraphic record has not been finished yet. See for example PANTALACCI 2008, 144–146 with evidence for the organisation of goods. See further PANTALACCI 2001 for the initial results of the distribution of seal impressions and, as a general introduction into her work relevant to the material found in the palace, PANTALACCI in: SOUKIASSIAN *et al.* 2002, 331–445 and PANTALACCI 2010.

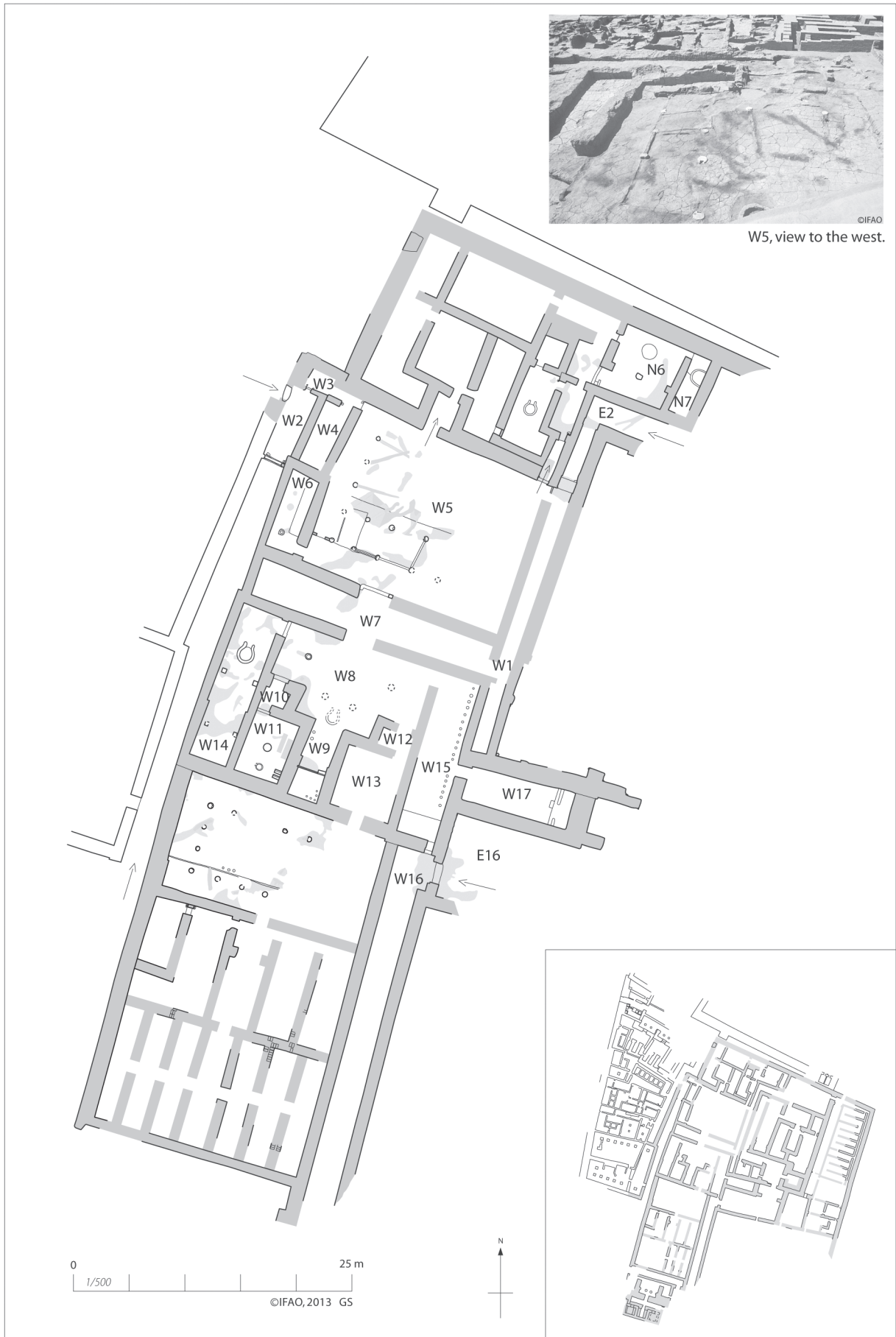


Fig. 6 The western apartment in its last state, with burnt areas on the floor in grey

the objects *in situ*, the possibilities for a functional analysis of the residence are restricted. Hence, the residence has to be designated as a general complex for a range of activities including different forms of administration, control and distribution of goods and persons, representation as well as domestic use.

As mentioned above, little is known about the earlier states of Phase I, and the knowledge we have is mostly restricted to the development of the Hwt-Ka area, including the later addition of the chapel of Medu-Nefer behind the residential zone, which replaces an older structure.¹⁴ The same limited base of knowledge holds true for the southern part of the palace complex, although later channels allow a deeper insight in certain locations. Thus it is known that two separated areas existed from the beginning of Phase I in the southern half of the palace, both accessible by the southern gate and from the north by the main courtyard (cf. Fig. 2).

The southeastern part was enclosed with its own precinct wall. Inside, two rows of units, each consisting of four or six rooms, are situated alongside of a long courtyard (approx. 57 m N/S × 7.7 m E/W). However, as Phase I is only partly excavated, the interpretation of the southeastern enclosure must remain tentative. While the architectural arrangement may be reminiscent in some ways of organised domestic quarters, e.g. barracks, no additional proof is provided by neither the features nor the objects. In fact, the rooms are remarkably empty with only a few indications of short-term storage and/or activity zones. Moreover, the accumulation of floors and cultural layers is, at approx. 0.1 m in thickness, relatively slight, and some rooms have never been occupied at all. Despite its formal arrangement the original purpose of the southeastern enclosure appears not to have led to intensive use. However, the south-eastern enclosure was also affected by fire at the end of Phase I. The gates and entry areas were demolished, but the main area inside showed hardly any traces of damage.¹⁵

Due to the well preserved later structures, even less is known of the southwestern part in Phase I. The impression provided by the architectural arrangement as visible over a wide area on the surface indicates a system of larger building units. They seem to be organised in specific groups, forming self-contained units that are connected by a complex system of corridors and courtyards. As yet

only a few areas that date to late Phase I have been excavated, including a vaulted magazine area in the central part and a courtyard at the western edge, most likely connected with the further magazines.¹⁶ Fire damage was well attested in the magazine complex, while the courtyard was mainly affected by the destruction of the surrounding buildings. In contrast to the southeastern enclosure, a major modification took place in late Phase I, including the construction of a massive staircase. This may indicate an adjustment for the access system made necessary by a possible partial renewal of structures in the surroundings. In addition, the accumulation of layers is a minimum of 0.2 m thick. Taking the archaeological record and the visible arrangement into consideration, the southwestern part may have served mainly as a long-term storage area, and included spaces for its administration and possible preparation activities.

Phase II: storage and work during the First Intermediate Period (Fig. 7)

Despite the large-scale fire damage, occupation continued without any notable gap. Organised rebuilding on a wide scale started immediately, though in some areas it occurred slightly later, in early Phase II. The only exception is the former residential part, which was abandoned, and no similar structure exists elsewhere within the excavated area. However, that Ayn Asil was still the seat of the governors is proven without doubt by the tomb of Betju, dated to the late First Intermediate Period, in which he uses the full title of the oasis governors.¹⁷ Further evidence for the southern enclosure still forming part of the palace is found in the newly built Hwt-Ka chapels situated just north of the southeastern enclosure, in which one chapel was again dedicated to Medu-Nefer (Fig. 7).¹⁸ In fact, a shallow but ongoing cult can be noted for the first chapel of Medu-Nefer as well as for chapel No. 2, but not a rebuilding.¹⁹ Altogether, the evidence confirms that the fire had no deep impact on the society living at Ayn Asil, and a major change inside the ruling elite is not visible from the archaeological data.

However, important changes took place in the arrangement of the palace. The strict boundary provided by the precinct walls, previously embracing the

¹⁴ Cf. SOUKIASSIAN *et al.* 2002, 22–32, 38–40, 57–60, 101–118, 126–128, 137–144, 150–165, 177–184.

¹⁵ Cf. JEUTHE *et al.* 2014, 205f.

¹⁶ Cf. JEUTHE *et al.* 2014, 206; JEUTHE 2012, 65–68.

¹⁷ Personal communication G. Soukiassian. Cf. VALLOGGIA 2004, 166f.

¹⁸ SOUKIASSIAN 2013, 5–24.

¹⁹ SOUKIASSIAN *et al.* 2002, 43, 60.

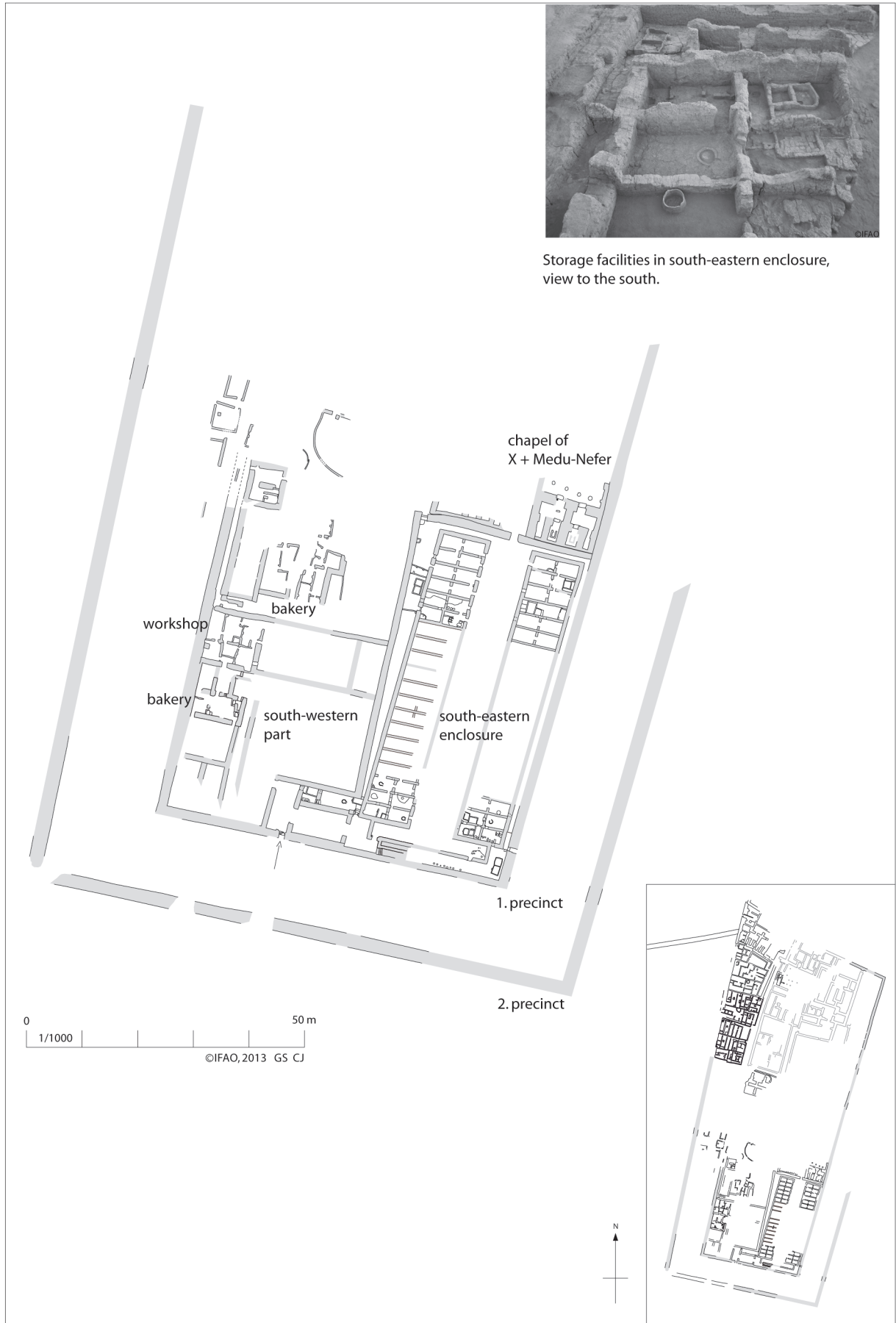


Fig. 7 The southern part of the palace during Phase II (with reconstructions)

different elements of Phase I, was loosened. The inner precinct wall was partly overbuilt or integrated into new structures from early in Phase II. Even the outer precinct wall was cut and overbuilt in some parts by the end of Phase II. As far as yet known, the area between both precincts, including the former supply area of the Hwt-Ka chapels, was completely dismantled, flattened and overbuilt. Several buildings, mainly of a domestic character and therefore designated as “maisons”, were arranged along a north-south street up to 4 m wide. This street still formed a boundary between the domestic buildings on its western side and the inner part of the palace complex to the east.²⁰

The southeastern enclosure also underwent major changes, although less in its architectural arrangement than in its use. Although the destruction at the end of Phase I was only located in its entrance areas, all the inner structures were flattened and replaced in almost the same arrangement with only a few minor changes, using the walls of Phase I as their foundations. In marked contrast to Phase I, after a reasonably shallow accumulation at its beginning, Phase II appears to be very rich in its development with up to 1.4 m of accumulated deposits in some places. It included several modifications and minor changes but no major difference in architecture until its abandonment. However, the individual room units are neither comparable with pure storage areas nor with habitation but include elements of both. For example, the southeastern rooms form a unit which includes short-term storage facilities, a bakery, an area for food preparation and a multi-functional work zone, but it also has at least one room of a domestic character. All functional features appear in different numbers all over the southeastern enclosure, but at least the rooms at the very northern end appear to have a stronger domestic component. The possible functional change might be a result of or at least was affected by the newly built Hwt-Ka chapels just to the north, although supply for other institutions and/or groups of persons is within the range of possibilities.²¹

In the southwest, the rebuilding started early in Phase II, and often still respected the massive walls that enclosed the building units during Phase I. However, the new construction with its small rooms changed the nature of the southwest area as for example by the creation of an intensively used

and highly organised workshop for silex tools and copper items.²² Other areas were also associated with supply and preparation, such as bakeries of various sizes. However, partial domestic use cannot be excluded in some cases, although the buildings differ from the maisons 1–9, built in the western area between the precinct walls.²³

Taking all the evidence into consideration, a decline cannot be realistically suggested for Phase II. Instead, it appears to be rich and solid in its intensive development, remaining at a highly organised standard. The reason for the eventual abandonment of its structures is an open question, to which none of the excavated areas provides any clue. Moreover, in the current state of research it also has to remain undecided whether all buildings of Phase II were abandoned at the same moment or whether this happened over time. Howsoever, despite the missing residential area, the palace complex is best characterised as having organised activity and supply zones inside the inner precinct and the domestic buildings outside it. Supply and in particular short-term storage played a major role, but large magazines for long-term storage as known in Phase I are missing. Hence, the last point would raise the question as to whether they were (re)built at an unknown location, or whether the general system of storage and distribution changed, making use of more but smaller facilities close to the associated supply points.

Phase III: organized supply for the palace of the early Middle Kingdom? (Fig. 8)

As for the last phase, only little evidence suggests that Ayn Asil was still part of a palace. Most parts of the southern enclosure were abandoned. New constructions took only place in the southwest, covering an area of at least 100 m N/S × 45 m E/W, and there was no noticeable hiatus following Phase II (Fig. 8). The new arrangements neither resemble the previous structures nor respect them but follow a new overall plan. Both former precinct walls lost their primary function, though in part they were integrated into the new buildings. Phase III also ended with destruction by fire, but in this case it appears accidental. After this, some areas saw a shallow resettlement, but the final state of Phase III is mostly well preserved. As far as known this does not differ notably from the original construction, as only minor modifications and local renewals are found.²⁴

²⁰ JEUTHE *et al.* 2014, 207; cf. for *Maison 1–6*: SOUKIASSIAN *et al.* 2002, 17, 97–175, 199–280; *Maison 7–9*: SOUKIASSIAN and LE PROVOST in preparation.

²¹ JEUTHE *et al.* 2014, 206f.

²² JEUTHE 2012.

²³ JEUTHE *et al.* 2014, 207.

²⁴ JEUTHE *et al.* 2014, 207ff.

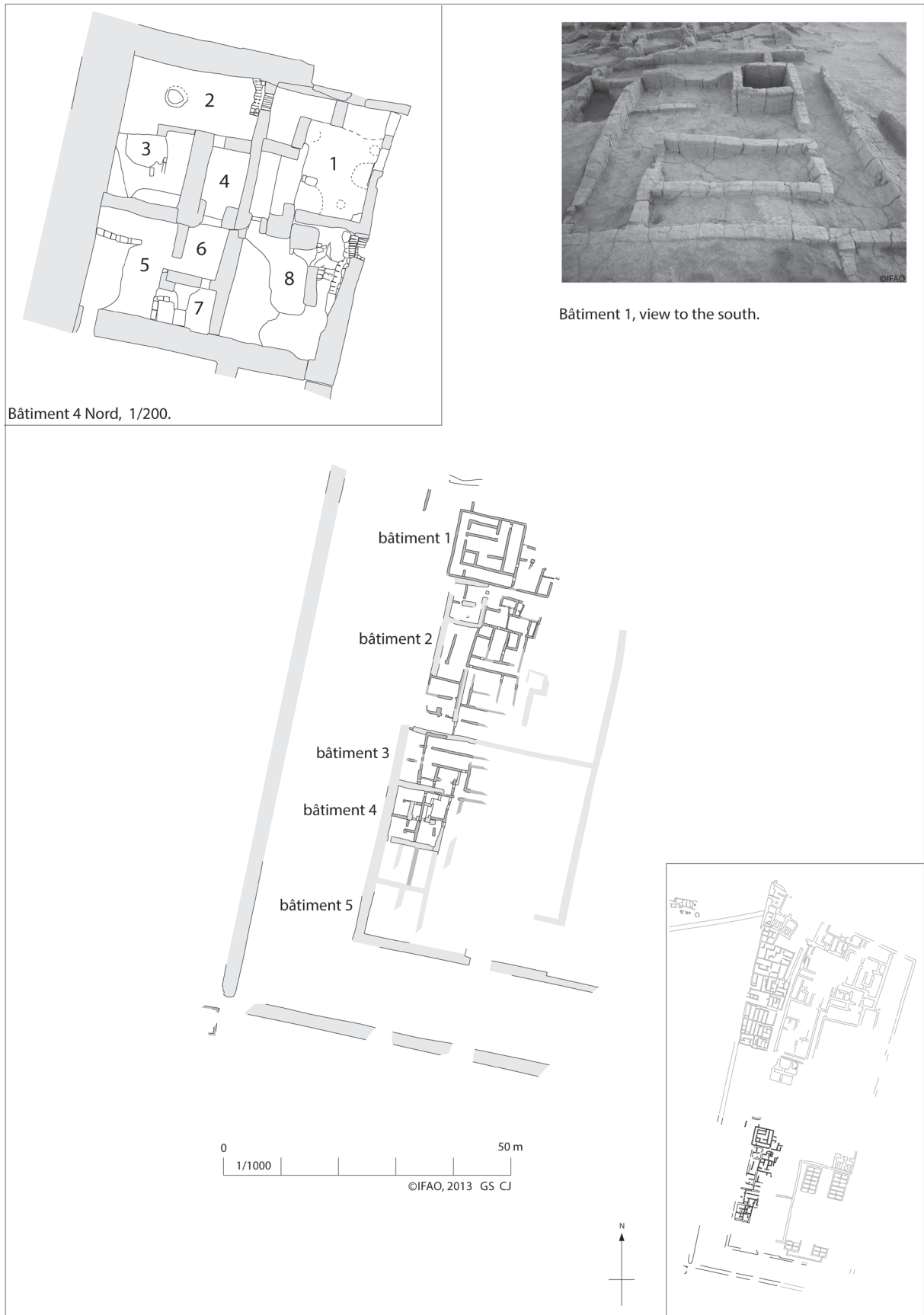


Fig. 8 The southwestern part of the palace during Phase III (dark grey) including previous walls still in use in light grey (with reconstructions)

Up to 2013, four self-contained building units, each called “bâtiment”, have been excavated, and at least one more similar unit is visible on the modern surface. One of them, bâtiment 3, shows no traces of use and is understood to be part of the construction according to the general plan.²⁵ At first glance, the other buildings differ in size and arrangement of rooms, but in fact they share the main elements. Bâtiment 4 Nord displays them well.²⁶ It has the central storage room 4 which was also used as silo. Filled from the south, a low opening at its northern end allowed the withdrawal of grain from room 2. Room 2 and the adjoining room 3 also served for storage as is demonstrated by several small vessels, and for food preparation as indicated by the ground stone implements. In addition, a scarab and in particular the large number of seal impressions, grouped around a large vessel, show administrative processes taking place. Room 1, a small courtyard containing several fireplaces and a dense accumulation of ash, was almost completely empty of finds (including ceramics) but may have served as a kitchen area. The southern rooms 5–8 are less specific in purpose. Although the arrangement of the individual rooms differs, the combination of a silo and long rooms used for transit, further storage and food preparation is well attested in bâtiment 1. These elements appear even repeatedly in bâtiment 2. Without doubt, the buildings form self-contained units for the strictly organized supply of specific groups of persons, and hence belong into an institutional framework so that the identification of the complex as a governor’s palace remains likely. However, only a few governors dating to the Middle Kingdom are known from rock inscriptions in the oasis region.²⁷ None of their tombs is yet known, although burials dating to the Middle Kingdom are attested at different sites in the oasis region, including Balat.²⁸ However, a re-used stela possibly dating to the earlier Middle Kingdom was recently discovered at Mut in the central oasis. It refers to a high-ranked official, possibly a governor, and a temple apparently located in Mut. This may indicate the shift of local power from Balat to Mut during the (earlier?) Middle Kingdom.²⁹ Its precise

| | Phase I | Phase II | Phase III |
|---------------------------------------|---------|----------|-----------|
| <i>residence</i> | ✓ | | |
| <i>central administration</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| <i>controlled access</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ? |
| <i>large magazines areas</i> | ✓ | | |
| <i>local storage areas</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| <i>organized supply</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| <i>cult monuments</i> | ✓ | ✓ | |
| <i>habitation</i> | ? | ✓ | ✓ |
| <i>funeral monuments of the elite</i> | ✓ | ✓ | |

Tab. 1 Elements of palaces in Ayn Asil and their appearance in the different phases

date and therefore its relation to our Phase III remains undecided, and allows Ayn Asil to still be the seat of the governors at this time. But even if Mut already filled that role during Phase III, the building units may still have been part of a palace, as their organisation suggests. Hence, the order and arrangement of different elements belonging to the palace would not only be loosened as seen in Phase II, but could be also located at a greater distance from each other, as a micro-region as Balat with water access and fields is unlikely to have been given up.

Conclusions

Ayn Asil impressively demonstrates the key elements of a provincial palace during the late Old Kingdom, and their continuance into the earlier Middle Kingdom. Beside the residence itself and its firm control of the goods stored inside, the cult monuments, the centralised long-term storage and supply attested in the southern half of the complex appear to have been an important aspect of local power. Its prominence is not only expressed by the formal architectural arrangement and complex arrangement of districts, in particular in Phase I, but also in their survival into the later phases (cf. Tab.1). A continuous loosening of the frame, with having the functional areas inside a common precinct, can be observed. Still during Phase II the organisation into different districts inside and domestic buildings outside is obvious. Phase III has so far only been excavated on a small scale, but the initial results already show that the new construction is based on a unified plan. The repeated occurrence of self-contained supply units is without doubt the result of central planning and administration.

The formal arrangement and the complex system of access, both understood as manifestations of power, are well expressed in the southern enclosure

²⁵ JEUTHE 2012, 105–107.

²⁶ The southern part of bâtiment 4 was only excavated in 2014.

²⁷ BAUD† *et al.* 1999.

²⁸ Personal communication V. Le Provost; cf. AUFRÈRE and BALLEST 1990, 25–28; ARNOLD in: OSING *et al.* 1982, 54f.; HOPE and KAPER 2010, 231.

²⁹ HOPE and KAPER 2010, 225–227, 232f.

and possibly also in the northern enclosure, because they were constructed without the need to consider previous structures. As a result, the identification of a provincial palace in Ayn Asil is far simpler than in settlements in the Nile Valley which have longer and more complex histories, such as Elephantine Island. There, elements such as organised supply areas and workshops occurred inside the walled settlement but were placed in different locations.³⁰ That arrangement may resemble more closely a palace structure as seen at Ayn Asil during Phase II or even Phase III. Other structures, for example at Giza,³¹ clearly resemble Ayn Asil in their scale of organisation but cannot be identified as palaces although clearly being part of a state controlled

complex. Ayn Asil is so far a unique example of such a building, and it is difficult to find comparisons to highlight its specific features. The palace of Bubastis, despite the difference in its date, may provide the closest comparison for the main complex, but this awaits further research.³² The large houses of the Middle Kingdom, such as those at Lahun³³ and Abydos³⁴ show certain similarities with regard to the complexity of their arrangements and the appearance of different elements as are seen in the residence in Ayn Asil. It seems then that due to its location Ayn Asil may be the only example of a provincial palace of its date, and may serve as a model for our understanding of palaces, including those of later periods.

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³⁰ For example VON PILGRIM 2006, SEIDLMEYER 1996 or ZIERMANN 1993; cf. BUSSMANN 2010, esp. 451–455.

³¹ LEHNER 2002, 60–63, 67.

³² Cf. VAN SICLEN 1996.

³³ Cf. BIETAK 1996 with further biographical references.

³⁴ WEGNER 2001.

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