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Life at Amarna during the late Roman Period

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Amarna;
North Tombs;
Romans;
Christians;
Monks;
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Settlements

Abstract

Tell El-Amarna has traditionally been viewed as a city that was entirely abandoned after the end of the Amarna Period and the return of the royal court to Thebes. However, this study re-examines that assumption by exploring archaeological evidence pointing to continued occupation and activity at the site, extending into the Late Roman and Byzantine periods. Notably, traces of Christian monastic settlements have been identified, particularly in the northern cliffs, where tombs and natural caves were repurposed into dwellings and churches. This research focuses on uncovering the nature and extent of post-Amarna habitation, with particular attention to domestic architecture, burial practices, and material culture, including pottery remains that suggest trade and daily life. The findings illustrate that the area was not merely reused but reimagined as a sacred Christian landscape. A multidisciplinary methodology was employed, incorporating archaeological fieldwork, ceramic analysis, architectural study, and evaluation of historical. The results reveal a sustained phase of Christian occupation, highlighting transformation of the site from a royal capital to a spiritually significant monastic zone.

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1. Introduction

The city of Tell El Amarna is the city that was said to be the city of one God where no one worshiped anyone other than him. It is the city of the sun from which life emerges for all beings. It was established by King Akhenaten in 1370 BC. He began its construction at the end of the fourth year of his reign. The king and his family moved to it at the beginning of the sixth year of his reign to convey this. The rule of Egypt led to a new capital in the middle of the two ancient capitals, the political in Thebes and the military in Memphis, where its location became an intermediary between Upper and Lower Egypt (Stevens, A. 2006,1).
The city extends 15 km from north to south and 3 km from west to east. Its buildings represent an integrated city, as there are many temples, royal palaces, ancient houses, bakeries, government offices, workshops, factories, warehouses and workers city.

2. Literature Review

2,1. Davies, N. de G. (1905). *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna II*. London: Egypt Exploration Fund.
2,2. Faiers, J. (2005). *Late Roman pottery at Amarna and related studies* (Excavation Memoir 72). London: Egypt Exploration Society.
2,3. Kemp, B., Stevens, A., & Rose, P. (2005). Tell El-Amarna. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 91, 15–27.
2,4. Sigl, J. (2011). Weaving Copts in the North Tombs of Tell El-Amarna. *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 40, 357–386.
2,5. Faiers J. 2013, *Late Roman glassware and pottery from Amarna and related studies*. London.

Many Scholars have presented studies of the Amarna site, stating that the site was completely abandoned after King Tutankhamun returned to Thebes and moved the capital again from Amarna to Thebes, which is completely inconsistent with many of the fixed and portable antiquities that have been discovered proving the continuation of human activity in the Amarna site after Tutankhamun, although to a lesser extent, traces were found dating back to the New Kingdom period and the reuse of the archaeological city of Amarna, especially during the 19th Dynasty (Kemp 2022,2).
Some coffins were found back to the Third Intermediate Period in the workmen village (Taylor, J.H. and A. Boyce 1986,118-145). Some artifacts were repeating found indicating the presence of increased human activity during the Late Period, and some Greek writings were also found in the region dating back to the Graeco-Roman period (Davies1905,34-37).
An animal cemetery for dogs was discovered at the Amarna site, which dates back to the early Roman period (Kemp B.2000,15-18). During the Byzantine period, the Amarna site witnessed intense human activity, which in turn led to the existence of a group of Christian complexes (collective monasticism) that scattered throughout the Amarna site, which was linked in its existence to other Christian complexes outside Amarna (Faiers, J. 2005,11-56).
Therefore, this study intended to investigate from Tell el-Amarna a large collection of archaeological evidence of continuous human activity, even in a lesser way than it was during the period of Akhenaten. After the leaving of Tutankhamun, the city of Amarna was not completely abandoned, but on the contrary, there was a large occupation of Amarna, especially during the Byzantine period.

3. The Main Objectives

3, 1. To study the development of Amarna after the departure of Tutankhamun to Thebes.
3, 2. To Collect and study the archaeological evidence of the occupation of Amarna after Tutankhamun's departure to Thebes.
3, 3. To highlight the Christian occupation of the area, particularly in the form of monastic complexes in the northern cliffs.
3. 4. To correct historical misunderstandings by reinterpreting the archaeological record of the Amarna site through updated fieldwork and analysis.

4. Methodology

The research employs an integrated archaeological approach that including field survey, ceramic analysis, architectural study, and historical text review. It focuses on examining reused structures at Tell El-Amarna, particularly in the North Tombs area, in order to identify patterns of Christian occupation. Pottery typology helped trace to trade and domestic practices, while comparative analysis with other monastic sites provided a wider context. Visual and spatial modifications within the tombs were analyzed to understand their transformation into Christian dwellings.

5. The Investigated Sites of Tell El-Amarna

The Northern Desert Cliffs

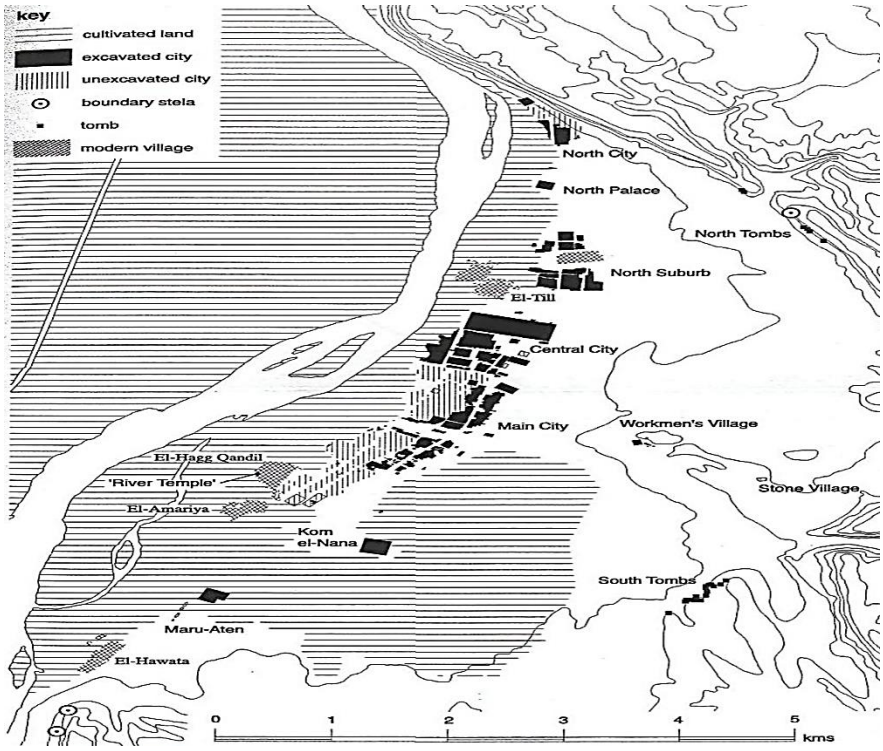
In the desert cliffs to the north of the 'Pendlebury fort' lies the North Tombs settlement (Figs.1, 2), the church at the heart of which indicates that its inhabitants were Christian. Davies was the first to suggest that the buildings of the North Tombs settlement do not represent the remains of the dwellings of the workmen who made the dynastic tombs, instead attributing them to 'the Copts' (Davies 1905a, 4). He describes their disposition as follows:" *In front of all of the tombs … walls of piled stones will be found marking out the rooms of what were once tolerable dwellings. They are generally considered to have been built for the convenience of the workmen engaged on the tombs, but this is obviously not so. They would in that case have been cleared away as soon as the tomb was completed; and while it is true that every tomb has ruined huts attached to it, any shelter afforded by a fallen boulder, a natural cave or an overhanging ledge was also seized upon for a wind-tight retreat, while roomier chambers were built into it to suit the occupants' fancy and need. Such constructions are found from end to end of this hill-side, and form colonies far from any tomb. Some are even placed on the summit, notably above Tomb 6*" (Davies 1905a, 4).

The work of Barry Kemp supports the interpretation of these dwellings as Christian community, Ceramic evidence, deriving chiefly from the midden deposits located outside each dwelling, shows consistent patterns of domestic use and disposal (Jones 1991,130–34).

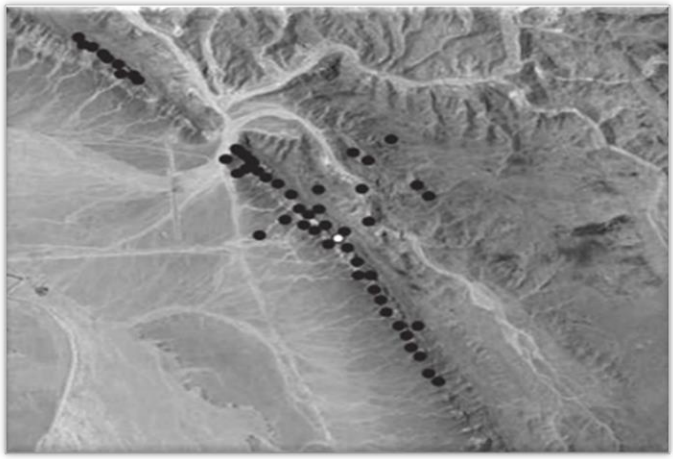
The assemblage at each dwelling comprised similar types of tables, cooking, storage and transport wares. This included tableware imported from elsewhere in Egypt and Tunisia as well as transport vessels from North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean that once contained oil, wine and possibly other luxury products (Kemp B.2005, 39).

The repertoire is broadly comparable with that at Kom El-Nana and the fort which had discovered by Pendlebury in the north suburb', but some of the imports seem to be slightly earlier, suggesting occupation in the mid-5th and 6th centuries AD. The

repertoire is broadly comparable with that at Kom El-Nana and the 'Pendlebury fort', but some of the imports seem to be slightly earlier, suggesting occupation in the mid-5th and 6th centuries. The settlement's desert setting and organization (Fig.2), and lack of any clear economic or industrial function, such as quarrying or gold-mining, argue for its identification as a monastic foundation (Pyke .2014,142)



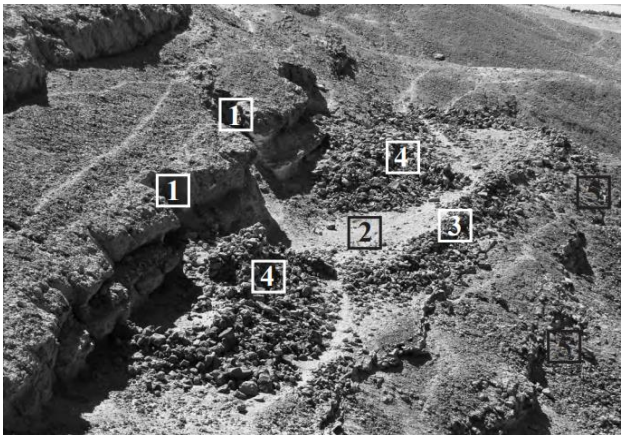
(Fig.1) A map of Amarna showing the locations (Stevens A. 2015,2)



(Fig.2) Amarna dwellings and associated structures in the north tombs' settlement (Pyke .2014,142)

Unlike Kom El-Nana, this monastery is dispersed among the cliffs that form the northern edge of the desert plain and comprises individual dwellings. They are separated by the challenging vertical and horizontal topography of the cliffs, spurs and gullies of the desert, but linked by paths and staircases and by a degree of visual interconnectivity. The self-contained dwellings have a consistent layout (Fig. 3), each

with either an Amarna period tomb chapel or a cave as its focal point, with additional roofed structures and open spaces in the courtyard or ledge space in front.



(Fig. 3) Layout and components of a typical dwelling at the North Tombs settlement (Pyke .2014.144)

These additions were constructed using locally available cobbles stones with limited evidence surviving for the use of mortar to fill gaps and for plaster coatings on walls and floors (Pyke G. 2010, 22). (Fig. 4)

(Fig. 4) Amarna Cobble-built constructions forming exterior components of a dwelling in the North Tombs settlement (Pyke.,2014,145)

The presence of beam slots indicates that additional elements such as roof supports were made of wood. The material used for the roofs themselves has not survived, but is likely to have been foliage, such as palm leaves, as used for the roofs of similar dwellings in the local village today (Pyke G. 2010,24). Modification to the rock-cut tomb-chapels were generally limited to the addition of niches, cupboards and looms, usually set close to the main doorway, and the removal of columns to provide more space and/or light. The presence of internal divisions is suggested by rock walls and linear sets of small circular post-holes in walls and floors, possibly for hurdle-type partitions.

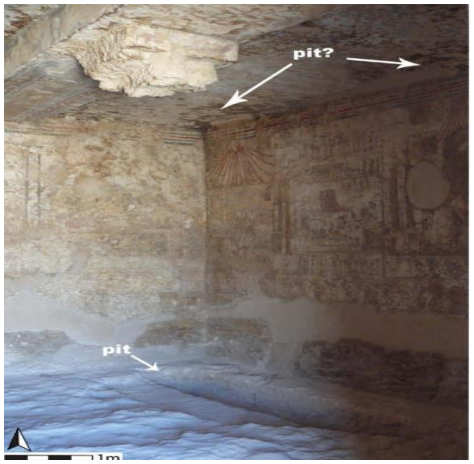
Modification of the visual environment of the tomb-chapels converted into dwellings does not seem to have been considered necessary, neither in the addition of Christian motifs nor the obliteration of any existing dynastic images. More extensive

modifications were necessary in the conversion of the first hall of the tomb of Panehsy (Tomb 6) into a church (Figs 5,6) (Pyke 2014,145).

(Figs 5,6) The apse, with the cornice of the original false door at the top, later window in the rear wall and cistern in the floor (Pyke 2008, EA 32,8)

The southern false door in the east wall was reconfigured to become the apse of the church, and the adjacent south wall was cut back so that the apse was centered in the east wall of the nave. Plaster coatings were used selectively to smooth the recut wall and floor surfaces. The southern boundary of this congregational space, which was further enlarged by the removal of the two northern columns, seems to have been immediately north of the main tomb entrance and the doorway leading to the second hall. The only remaining trace of this boundary is the slightly lipped transition from the plaster floor of the nave to the smooth stone floor of the adjacent area to the south. With this in mind, it is possible to propose that the position of the niche in the west wall of the nave is significant, perhaps located next to the doorway to the nave (Pyke 2014,146).

The smoothing of the floor of the space to the south of the nave was associated with alteration to the lower parts of the remaining south columns to provide more floor space, and a water installation (Fig.7) close to the main doorway. Partitions between the columns screened off the ancient staircase, which may have been covered over (Pyke 2014,146).



(Fig.7) Water installation (Sigl J. 2011,392)

The visual programme of the church underwent significant modification, at least in the area of the apse, throughout its lifetime. Initially it comprised of red niche and apse arches, red crosses in the entrance passage and either side of the apse, and a red band around the lower part of the wall, painted over the existing decoration. This basic programme, which unified the built and visual elements of the church through the repetition of shapes and colors, was retained throughout the lifetime of the church, except in the area of the apse. Here a progressive increase in complexity can be detected in the several re-paintings, the east wall eventually being populated with images including candles, doves, a peacock, garlands and a human figure, surrounding the unique apse composition (Fig.8) (Pyke G.2014,147).

(Fig.8) The church inside the tomb of Panehesy (Photographed by the Researcher)

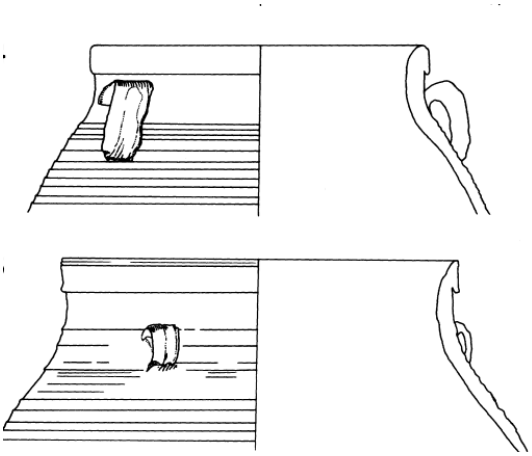
The image of an eagle, with a less fantastical single pair of wings, is also used as the focal composition in a similar apse in Tomb 25 at Sheikh Said, where Davies noted that 'traces of painting remain on the ceiling of the apse, which seem to represent extended wings' (Davies 1901, 16). A further eagle is depicted in the semi-dome of the apse of the church at Deir El-Dik in El Shikh Abada (Martin 1971, 32–33) perhaps suggesting that this might have been a locally significant theme.

The use of the same building techniques in the platform below the caves as at the North Tombs settlement and the presence of similar ceramic types perhaps suggest a close association between the Great Wadi dwelling and the North Tombs settlements (Fig. 9). (Faiers 2005, 182–87; Pyke 2010, 24)

(Fig. 9) The Great Wadi cave complex on the eastern side of the Amarna plain (Pyke, G.2014,148)

The pottery

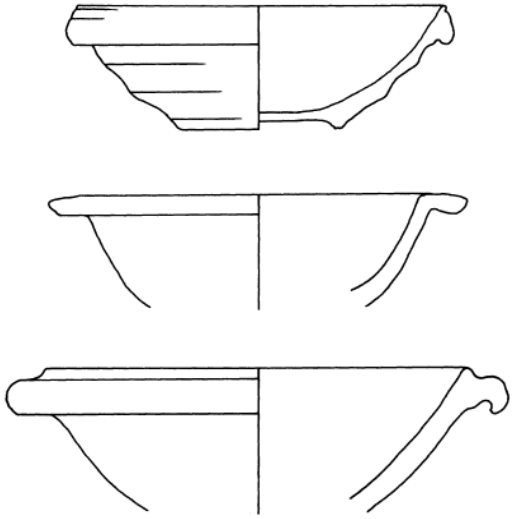
A vast quantity of sherds represents a wide range of vessel types, amongst which there is evidence for contacts with production and distribution centers elsewhere in Egypt. The most frequent types are brown, micaceous Nile silt ribbed amphorae and fine cooking pots also of Nile silt fabric Two Types of Nile silt amphorae seem to occur in large numbers: the 'Hermopolite Amphora Type B' well documented in the nearby urban center of Hermopolis (Bailey D. M.,1982,43-4), and the extremely common, slender amphora. Both types are datable to the later Roman/Byzantine period and early Arab (Ummayad-Abbassid) Period, between the Sixth and Ninth centuries AD. The amphorae are almost entirely represented by body sherds; some handles and points are present but these are usually quite eroded (Ballet P. and Picon M.,1987,36-8). All these sherds had discovered between 1989-1995 by the British mission and stored in the magazines in Tell El Amarna (Fig. 10).



(Fig. 10) Amarna cooking pots (Jones M.1991,137)

No substantial fragments of rims or necks were seen. The inner surfaces of these amphorae were invariably coated with a thick black substance, up to 0.0115 cm inside the bases. A second amphora ware, also quite common but again only as body sherds, is of a pink to light buff fabric with 'squared' horizontal ridges on both the inner and outer surfaces, those on the outside being somewhat more prominent (Fig.10). The fabric contains a good deal of small black and white gritty flecks and sand, and some small, sharp, pointed red pieces which may be crushed pottery reused as temper in the clay mixture, all of which are quite evenly distributed. The surfaces are neither slipped nor treated internally (Faiers 2013,40).

These amphorae also occur at the early Christian settlements around the Middle Kingdom tombs of Beni Hassan and El Bersha, and have been recorded Wadi Firan, Sinai, and Abu Shaar on the Red Sea coast of Egypt. They are known throughout the Roman world in contexts dating from the early fifth to mid-seventh centuries AD. Their place of manufacture is not certain, but they have been imported vessels having originated in either Cyprus or the Antioch region of Syria. On the other hand, they could have been made near Alexandria (Fig.11), where the coastal clays can produce this kind of pale buff ware (Riley J. A.,1989,154).



(Fig.11) Egyptian red slip wares (Jones M.1991,136)

6. Conclusion

The following two tables (designed by the researcher) are concluding remarks of the locations, tools, and construction materials mentioned in the study:

Table (1) locations mentioned in the study

Location	Description
Beni Hassan, El Bersha	Early Christian settlements in Middle Egypt
Deir El-Dik	Monastic site with related Christian visual themes
Great Wadi Cave Complex	Eastern settlement showing architectural and ceramic links to the North Tombs
Hermopolis	Urban center linked to amphora production
Kom El-Nana	Nearby Christian site with similar ceramic finds
North Tombs Settlement	Christian laura community with modified tombs and caves
Sheikh Said	Comparative monastic site with similar apse decorations
Tell El-Amarna	Main archaeological site, former capital of Akhenaten
Wadi Firan, Abu Shaar, Sinai	Other Roman-era ceramic distribution points

Table (2) Tools, and construction materials mentioned in the study

Item/Tool	Use or Significance

Boulder-built walls	Added privacy and room division in reused tombs
Cooking pots	Domestic use; similar types across North Tombs dwellings
Niche carvings and loom emplacements	Indications of domestic and possibly religious activity
Nile silt amphorae	Used for storage/transport; common in Byzantine domestic contexts
Painted decorations (crosses, animals, motifs)	Christian visual expression in converted chapels
Palm leaves or foliage	Likely roofing material in shelters
Plaster coatings	Used in modifying tomb interiors into churches
Wooden roof beams (lost)	Roof support in desert dwellings

The constructions in the area date back to the early Christian period in Egypt, reflecting the spread of Christian remains across all the northern cemeteries and the extent to which each was utilized. Material evidence shows that the Christianization of the Amarna region occurred at four main sites around perimeter. The process itself is quite clear: monks built new structures along the edge of the desert and modified existing tombs and caves in the transitional zones between the low and high desert, using locally available materials.

Interestingly, there was no reuse of the Pharaonic temples in Amarna. The monks' choice of settlement seems to have been driven by personal spiritual needs rather than political or ideological motivations. The move into the desert likely stemmed from a desire to separate themselves from the distractions of secular life and focus on spiritual growth. It is unlikely that these groups were fleeing pagan persecution, and the site was probably not chosen as a confrontation zone with paganism.

By the time the monastic communities were established, it is probable that pagan practices had already disappeared from the region. Another factor that may have attracted these communities was the desert environment itself. Since the earliest days of monasticism, the desert was viewed as a place of withdrawal from society and a spiritual battlefield where monks could confront inner demons. According to tradition, these demons were exiled to the space between the desert and the heavens, yet the fear of their return persisted.

Although it cannot be proven archaeologically, the strategic positioning of monastic foundations around the desert edge of the Amarna plain may have had ideological significance. It may have been seen as a way to create a spiritual barrier between the Christian world of the Nile Valley and the dangerous, potentially demonic landscape of the surrounding desert. Furthermore, the monks likely chose elevated locations, caves, ancient tombs, and the liminal spaces of desert wadis intentionally, viewing them as spiritually charged and symbolically powerful places.

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