

Akhmim “Panopolis” in the Graeco-Roman Period: A Historical, Archaeological Study and Local Touristic Development

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Abstract

Akhmim or Greek *Panopolis* is situated about 450 Kilometers south of Cairo on the east bank of the Nile. It is a city in the Souhag governorate. Aahmim or ancient *Chemmis* is located 40 miles northeast of the city of Souhag. Akhmim has a long history dating back to the Pre-dynastic Period. It continued in the ancient Egyptian, Graeco-Roman, Coptic and Arabic Periods. It was the capital of the Ninth Nome of Upper Egypt. King Ay of the Eighteenth Dynasty and the Greek poet Nonnus were born in Akhmim. The Greek geographer Strabo mentioned that there was a linen weaving industry in Akhmim. The most important historical sites in this city are the Necropolis of El-Hawawish,, El-Salamuni cemetery, the grotto of Pan, and a temple dedicated to Min and Amun-Ra.

Keywords: Akhmim, Panopolis, Graeco-Roman, Egypt, history, archaeology.

Introduction

Akhmim or Greek *Panopolis* (Pl.1) is situated about 450 Kilometers south of Cairo on the east bank of the Nile in Upper Egypt (van Rengen, 2013), while the city of Souhag is situated on the opposite side on the western bank. Akhmim is a city in Souhag governorate. It was the main cult centre of Min, the ancient Egyptian god of fertility, whose triad consisted of him, Isis and Horus (Elias, 2013). This city was the capital of the Ninth Upper Egyptian Nome in the dynastic period and its distinguished history dates back to approximately sixth thousands years (van Rengen, 2013). Akhmim was called in the Ancient Egyptian texts $\text{𓂏𓂏𓂏} ipw$ (Erman & Garbow, 1971) or $\text{𓂏𓂏𓂏} xnt-Mnw$ or “of god Min”, belonging to Min” (Faulkner, 1991). The name *xnt-Mnw* became *Chemmis* $\text{Χέμμιν} \varphi$ in Greek, Aymin, eymin, xmin, xmim , yxmin (Timm, 1984) in Coptic, and then Akhmim in Arabic. Akhmim was called Πανόφ πόλιφ meaning “the city of Pan” in the Ptolemaic period. However, its name is mentioned in Strabo as well as some early Greek papyri as Πανών πόλιφ , which became Panopolis in Latin (van Rengen, 2013), according to Pliny (Pliny & Holland, 1948).

Akhmim history

Akhmim attained a great importance in the government under the Fifth and the Sixth Dynasties. A native of Akhmim, *Horway I*, was appointed as vizier in the reign of Pepi I of the Sixth Dynasty. Another native *Tjeti-iqr*, who was a high-official during the reigns of Merenre and Pepi II of the Sixth Dynasty, had worked in Memphis and then became the governor of Akhmim. There are rock-cut tombs and wooden coffins of Middle Kingdom date, which are discovered at this city (Elias, 2013). Yuya, the father Queen Tiye of the Eighteenth Dynasty, was the priest of Min in Akhmim, and his wife Thuya was the Mistress of the Robes in Min's temple (Bunson, 2002). It was also the home city of King Ay (1323- 1319 BC) of the Eighteenth Dynasty (van Rengen, 2013) King Ramesses II of the Nineteenth Dynasty erected his colossus there together with the statue of his daughter Meritamun measuring about 11 meters in height. Both were erected in order to stand in front of the New Kingdom temple of Min. The consort of Pinudjem II of the Twenty First Dynasty, Istemkheb and her step daughter Nesinebtasheru occupied high positions in the clergy of Akhmim (Elias, 2013)

Herodotus (about 450 BC) cited Akhmim in Thebaid in his accounts. He also mentioned that the people of *Chemmis* held athletic contests in a Greek Style revering the Greek hero Perseus, who had Egyptian ancestors. The prizes of these contests were usually cattle, cloaks and skins. Herodotus described the temple of Min, which was probably of Ramasside date, with a stone enclosure, two colossi and palm trees. There was also a statue of Perseus inside the temple. Moreover, the *Chemmites* or the people of Akhmim told him that Perseus appeared to them because his ancestors were from Akhmim (*The History of Herodotus*, 1949). They were called Danaus and Lynceus (Elias, 2013). The people of Akhmim told Herodotus that they immigrated to Greece by the sea and Perseus himself visited Akhmim, while bringing the Medusa's head from Libya (*The History of Herodotus*, 1949). Perseus was most probably identified with Min and Horus (Lloyd, 1969). In the Graeco-Roman period, Panopolis attained a great importance as a Hellenistic culture center. It became the metropolis of the Panopolite Nome. In the Ptolemaic period, the quarters of the city of Akhmim had numbers, whereas the streets had names. Moreover, the city had two temples of Min as well as temples of other deities, who were Persephone, Amun, Agathos-Daimon, Arous, Hermes, and Chnoubis (Van Rengen, 2013). Strabo mentioned that **“Panopolis an old settlement of linen-workers and stone-workers”** (Jones, 1967).

Πανῶν πόλις, λινουργῶν καὶ λιθουργῶν κατοικία παλαιά.

Besides, there were also metal working and ship building among the economic activities in this city. The cultural life of Akhmim is best known in the Roman and the late Roman Periods. The city played a very important role as a center of Greek culture. A new international agnostic festival was celebrated every four year from 264 AD onwards. It was among the celebrations of the great festivals of Pan. There were also athletic, musical, Pythian Games of celestial Perseus held among the Great festival of Pan or the Great Pania (van Rengen, 2013). There is a Greek inscription written on a piece of calfskin discovered at Akhmim and dating back to the Roman period. It is rectangular in shape and measures 0.30 m. in length and 0.10 in width. This inscription is written in capital letters in three lines. Its owner is M. Alexander, a merchant of antiquities. A replica was made of the inscription and this is its photo:



« Ἱερὸς εἰσελαστικὸς οἰκουμενικὸς ὀλύμπιος ἀγὼν Περσέως οὐρανίου τῶν μεγάλων Πανείων. »

It reads as “sacred games, triumphal ecumenical (international) Olympian, of the celestial Persues, in the great *Pania*”. This inscription confirms the story told by Herodotus that the Games of Perseus were held at Akhmim in a Greek fashion (Iconomopoulos, 1889) (van Rengen, 1971). The famous Greek poet Nonnus, of the Fifth century AD, is a native of Panopolis. He is the author of the *Dionnysica*. He is considered to be the best Greek poet in the Roman period. He was regarded as talented as Homer (Chamberlayne, 1919). He most probably worked in Alexandria. The *Dionnysica*, is the longest poem, which ever survived from ancient eras. It is an epic poem relating the tale of Dionysus. Nonnus finished this poem in about 470 AD. Later on, Nonnus converted to Christianity. St. John’s Gospel was composed into a poem. Therefore, Nonnus served paganism as well as Christianity (Foley, 2005)

The cultural importance of Panopolis is asserted by other poets of Akhmim, who lived also in the Fourth and Fifth century AD. They are Triphiodorus, Pamprepios and Cyrus. In the early fourth century AD, the city housed the episcopal seat and started to be converted to Christianity. However, the christianization of Panopolis was not complete until the Sixth century AD. Then, it housed many monasteries and nunneries illustrating various types of monasticism such as Pachomian foundations located on the east bank of the city and the White Monastery on the west bank, whose head was Shenoute. In the Arabic period Akhmim emerged as a significant Coptic city as well as a main center of textiles. The historian Abu Salih Abu'l Makarim, who lived in the late Thirteenth century, cited that there were 70 churches either in or in the vicinity of Akhmim. Unfortunately, few only survived by the end of the Nineteenth Century (van Rengen, 2013).

Monuments of Akhmim

Monuments in the city of Akhmim itself are scarce because the ancient city lies under the modern one. There was most probably a huge magnificent temple of Min, which still existed in a good state of preservation in the fourteenth century AD. It resembled the temple of Dendera in style. Then, ancient buildings were used as a quarry to build mosques, schools and houses in Akhmim. For example, Roman pillars and grave are found in the grounds of prince Mohamed mosque, which was rebuilt in the Ottoman period. The temple of Min may be erected by Ptolemy IV or Ptolemy X. In fact, modern travellers mentioned that blocks of the temple belonging to Ptolemy IV, Ptolemy X, Ptolemy XII, Nero, Trajan, Domitian, Caisaros, and Germanicus. There are two main archaeological sites (Pl.2), on the east bank, recorded by the European travellers of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. These sites are located to the north and to the northeast of modern Akhmim, lying approximately 90 meters far from one another. The first, which is the largest, contains limestone blocks. There was a large block, which is now lost but recorded, found under a modern building. It was inscribed with a Greek dedication of Pan. It mentioned constructions in the temple of Pan and Triphis in about 109 AD (Geens, 2007a).

The second archaeological site is called by the native people of Akhmim “*el-birbe*” or the temple. The *Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Abteilung Kairo (DAIK)* made excavations in the site in 1981 and discovered in Karm al-Tawr remains of a huge temple built by Ramesses II. The temple was also completed in the following periods. A cartouche of Emperor Trajan was also found in this temple.

The Egyptian Antiquities Organization excavated this area under the direction of El-Masry. They discovered fragments of a statue of Ramesses II as well as a colossus of his daughter Merit-Amun (Pl.3) measuring 11 meters in height. Later, the excavations of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in 1987 revealed two seated statues of Ramesses II, a statue of the high priest of Min under King Aye, Nakht- Amun as well as a female calcite statue of Aphrodite or Venus (?) dating to the Roman period. These statues were found in the northeastern corner of this site. The site was turned into an-open air museum in 1995. It is some meters lower than the modern ground level displaying the statue of Merit-Amun in the center. They discovered a Queen statue, and parts of seated colossus belonging to Ramesses II, which surrounded by mud brick-walls in 1991, approximately 45 meters to the north of the temple of Ramesses II. The rest of this site lies under the neighboring modern Muslim cemetery. A head of a colossus of Ramesses II was discovered by illegal excavators. The excavations of the Supreme Council of Antiquities found the rest of the statue as well as an enormous colossus of the same King in 2003. Actually, the latter Colossus is the largest known seated limestone colossal statue. It measures 700 tons in weight 13 meters in height. The court of the temple of Min most probably lied between the seated colossal statues of Ramesses II and that of Merit- Amun. Excavations are still going on in this area, and the modern cemetery will be transferred to another area. A limestone pavement, which measures about 23 meters long and 3.5 meters wide and is enclosed by some limestone blocks and basins, is situated about 250 meters of the Ramesside temple (Pl. 4) (Geens, 2007a).

A Ptolemaic temple was found at Gebel Abu el-Nasr, situated to the south end of the village of Nazlet el-Haridi. Parts of this temple are cut in the rock and the others are built of stone. A large round-topped stela was found there inscribed of a high-quality hieroglyphic inscription of the Canopus decree (Turin Museum 129 851). There are also Ptolemaic quarries discovered in this area. The ancient village of Athribis (PL.5) lies on the west bank approximately 7 kilometers southwest of Souhag. It is situated near the modern village of Wannina al-Gharbiya. This site has an ancient village, temple site, as well as a cemetery. It played a very important role in the cult's history of the Panopolite Nome. The monuments of Athribis date to the Ptolemaic, Roman, and Coptic period. Petrie visited this site in 1908 and he made copies of some inscriptions and most of the sculptures of the temple. Moreover, a plan was made for the temple of Triphis by Petrie. Egyptian Antiquities Organization excavated the site from 1981 to 1985 in order to discover the late Ptolemaic and Roman temple and the neighboring hill.

They discovered that the building in the middle of Athribis necropolis, which was mistakenly known as a huge tomb, is actually a late Ptolemaic or early Roman temple of Asclepius. The Egyptian Antiquities organization worked in the site for about eleven seasons from 1986 to 1998. An Egyptian-German team, headed by Tübingen Egyptologists, started excavating the site from 2003 onwards. They studied the inscriptions of the blocks of the temple, which is in ruins. In fact, three temples were erected in Athribis at the foot of the hill which was used for building the temples. The first was temple built of granite and was known as the temple of Physkon by Petrie. It measured 39 x 45 meters and was built during the reign of king Apries of the twenty-sixth Dynasty. Nothing remained of this temple except for the foundations. Ptolemy IX probably built another temple or added a huge stone pylon measuring 52.5 meters in width and he surrounded it with mud-brick walls. A limestone processional way, which measures about 200 meters in length, ends with the ruin of enormous gateway erected by Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II. Ruins of Roman chapels can still be seen on each side of the stairways. A limestone dromos is approached from the gate of Physkon and ends northwest in the pavement of the forecourt, then, to a new temple (the second), which was erected by Ptolemy XII Auletes. It was perhaps consecrated to Min and Triphis (Geens, 2007a).

The temple of Ptolemy XII (Pl.6) measures 75 x 45 meters. Ptolemy XII erected the naos, while Tiberius set up the pronaos. Claudius and Hadrian enlarged this temple. It was finally completed in the third Century AD. The temple was erected of local limestone and ornamented with inscriptions and reliefs. Parts of the temple are in ruins, some rooms are still buried, and the other parts are in a good condition standing to the roofs decorated with blue, yellow as well as red colours. The pronaos has two rows of six columns. It leads to a hypostyle hall flanked by side rooms. The hypostyle hall is followed by three longitudinal sections with the central one opens into the sanctuary of the temple. The third temple is the rock-cut temple of Asclepius dating back to the Graeco-Roman period. It is situated on the other side of the hill. The cemetery of El-Hawawish was called cemetery A by Kuhlmann. It lies on the east bank on the neighbouring hill of Nag el-Diyabat. There are tombs dating from the Pre-dynastic period to the Islamic period. However, most of the tombs are of Graeco-Roman date. Maspero excavated this cemetery from 1884 to 1888. Immediately after him, Bouriant and Forrer excavated this area searching for Coptic textile. Kuhlmann studied this area in 1981/1982. Inspectorate of Antiquities of Sohag sounded the cemetery in 1985 and then from 1989 to 1999.

They discovered tombs from the Ptolemaic period as well as a tomb of ibis housing falcon mummies. The tombs were classified by Kuhlmann into three types. Type A-1 dates back to the Graeco-Roman period. Type A-1a with the tombs are partly cut in the rock and partly built of mud-brick and date to the Ptolemaic period. They are dug in the hill with descending passages, steps as well as stairs, which lead down into separate burial chambers. The majority of Akhmim stelae apparently discovered in these tombs. Type A-1b (Pl. 7) is steep shafts tombs cut in several stories. Each shaft has from about 8 to 10 burial niches housing burials in sarcophagi dating from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. Type A-2 is square animal tombs, whereas type A-3 (Pl.8) has Christian shaft tombs (Geens, 2007a).

The cemetery of El-Salamuni was called C by Kuhlmann. It is situated on the east bank to the northeast of Akhmim. Some of the tombs in this cemetery date to the Old Kingdom, but most of the tombs date to the late Pharaonic, Ptolemaic and Roman eras. L'hôte excavated the cemetery in 1839. Then, Lepsius excavated studied the site between 1843 and 1845. He mentioned the magnificent rock-cut temple of Min. It was called by him the grotto of Pan. The majority of the tombs are unornamented. The coptologist Schmidt excavated this cemetery in 1896. Von Bissing visited this cemetery in 1897, and then he went again with Kees in 1913. They surveyed the temple of Min dating to the reign of king Aye. Kuhlmann investigated the necropolis from 1977 to 1981. He discovered that the above mentioned temple, which was re-used in the Roman and Coptic periods. The tombs were classified by Kuhlmann into three types. Type C-1 includes 29 rock-cut tombs of Old Kingdom. Type C-2 (Pl.9) is plain shaft-tombs of Ptolemaic (and probably Roman (?)) date. They have one or two burial chambers. The shaft leads to an antechamber leading to a burial chamber having niches cut in its walls. The niches have anthropoid trenches to bury the deceased. Type C-3 (Pl.10) involves "facade" tombs, which date from the first to third centuries AD. They are carved horizontally on the rock. The entrance-façade leads to a room or more up to five ante-chambers and then to one or more burial chambers with niches having anthropoid trenches to bury the deceased (Geens, 2007a).

The cemetery of Athribis or Tripheion is situated on the west bank of the Nile nearby the temple of Athribis. It was chiefly used in the Graeco-Roman period. Nestor l'hôte visited this cemetery in 1839, and then he was followed by Lepsius. Thousands of mummy labels were obtained from this cemetery by Bouriant, Schmidt and Forrer in the late nineteenth century. Afterwards, Bouriant visited the site in 1889. Petrie carried out excavations there in 1908 and he mentioned some tombs.

The most important of them are the so-called zodiac tomb and that of Psenosiris. Then, the latter tomb as lost from 1952. It was found again by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization in the excavations of 1981-1985 together with a Late period undecorated tomb. The entrance of this tomb has a Greek inscription to Asclepius; therefore, it was most probably Asklepieion. The rock-cut tombs, which date to the Ptolemaic and Roman period, can be classified into two types. The first type is façade-tombs lying on the uppermost row. They are more elaborate than the second type. The mummies were placed in the burial chamber's niches. The second type is the shaft-tombs like that of Psenosiris, which is most probably early Roman tomb (Geens, 2007a).

Touristic development of Akhmim

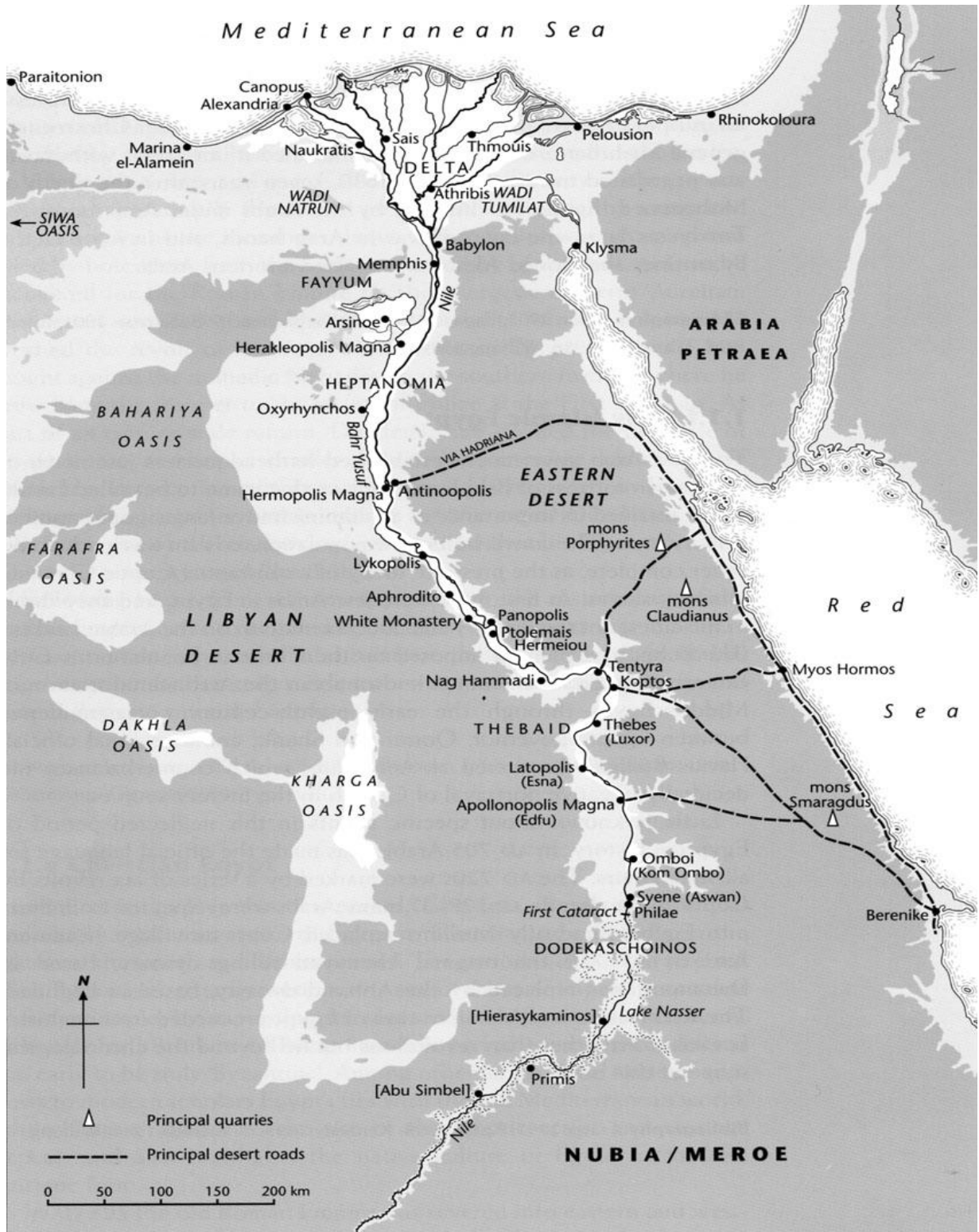
The rich civilization, the long history of Akhmim, and the monuments of Akhmim should be exploited in local touristic civilization. It is highly recommended to design of virtual reality visits to this area. Moreover, electronic tourist marketing of Akhmim should be executed by the mobile phone connected to the internet. It is strongly recommended to establish a tourist information center in which the tourist could listen and watch compact disks and videos for history and archaeology of this site in different languages. Commercials and films must be displayed in the foreign Media. The unification and co-ordination of the efforts of the ministry of tourism, the Akhmim and the international union of electronic tourism EUOTI are very important for the marketing and publicity of this city. An environmental hotel like that of Siwa should be established in Akhmim. The revival of the silk and linen textile industry for which Akhmim was anciently worldwide famous.

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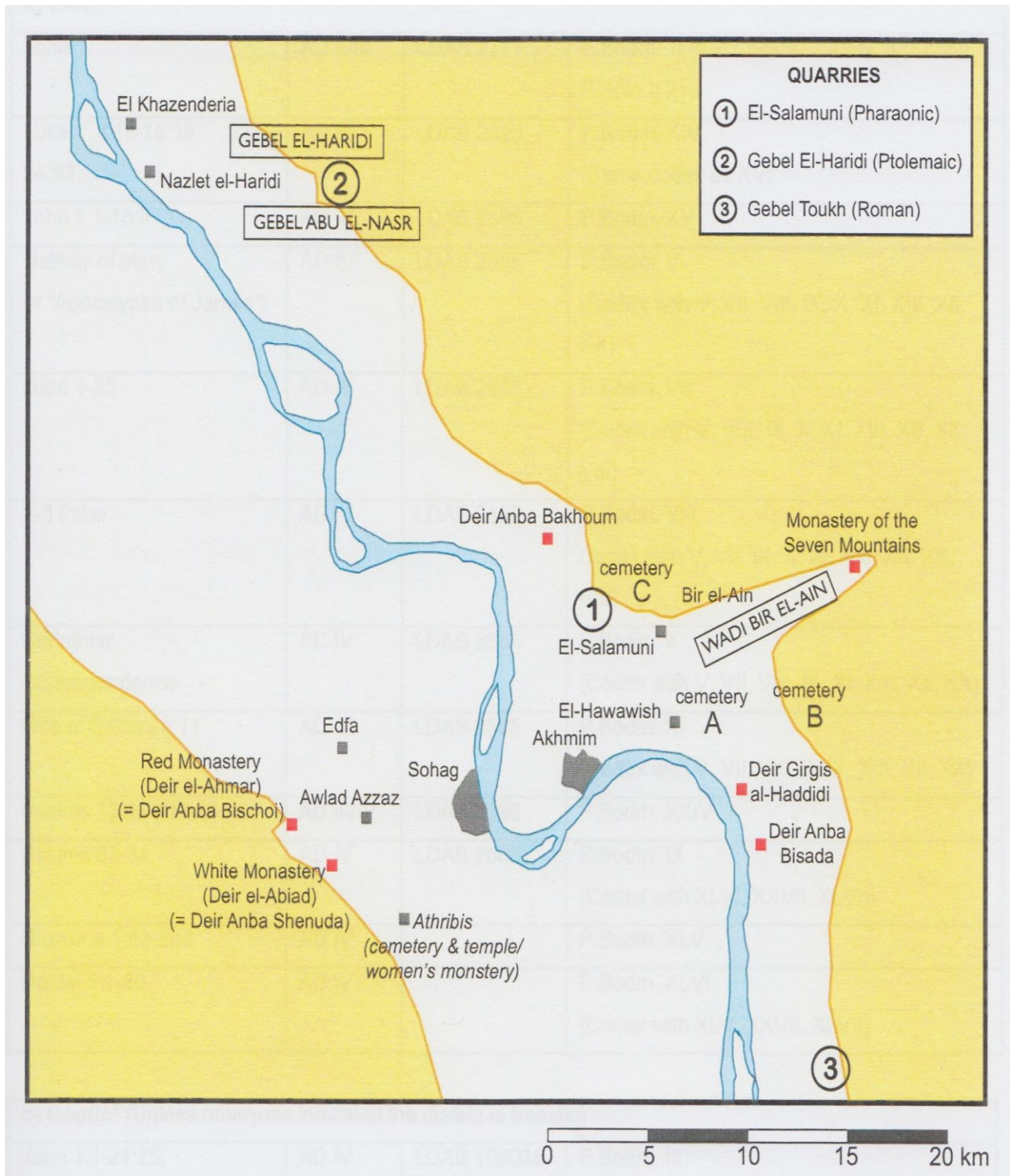
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Appendix



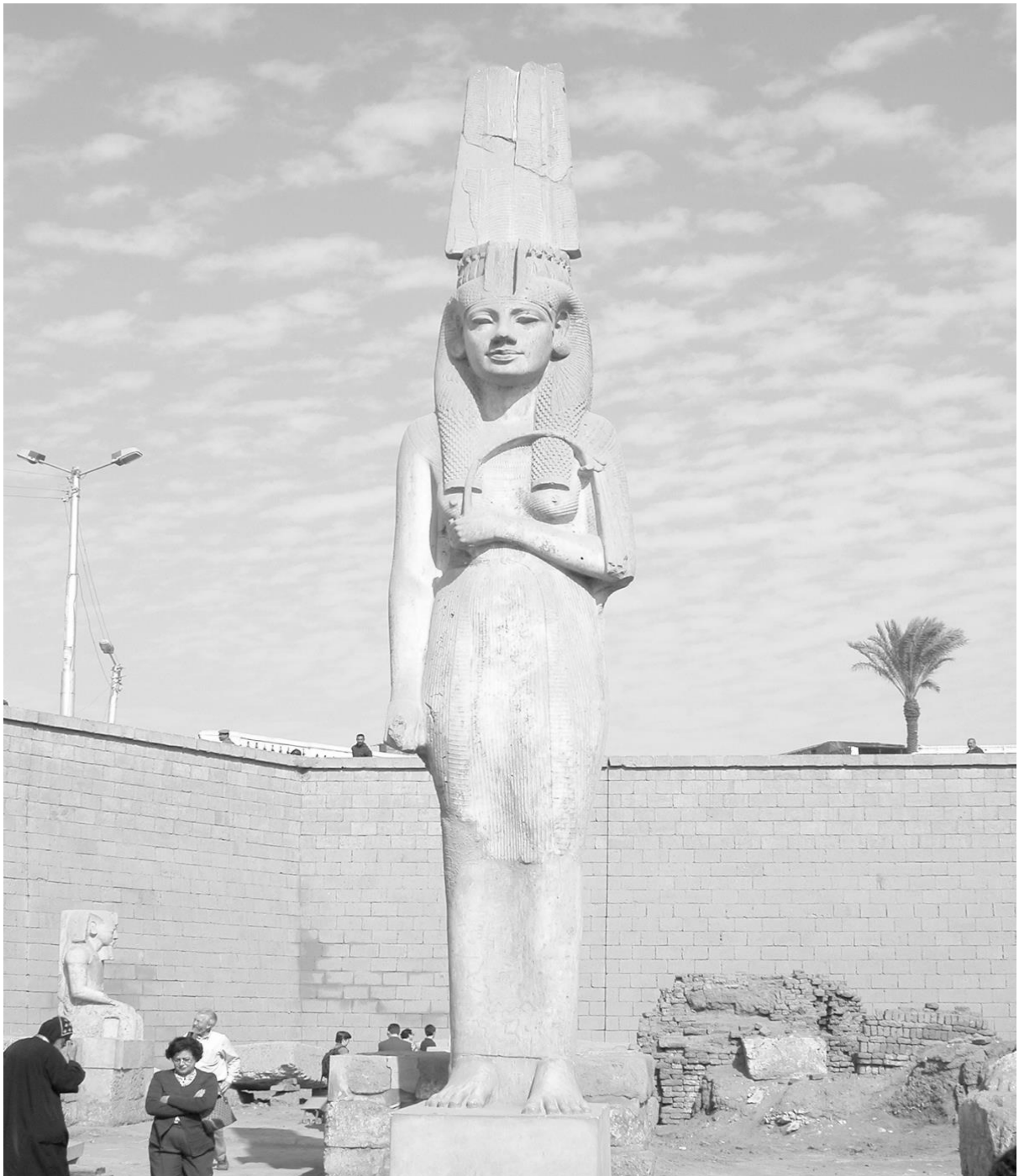
Pl.1- Map of Panopolis (Akhmim)

After (R. Bagnall & Rathbone, 2004), p.20



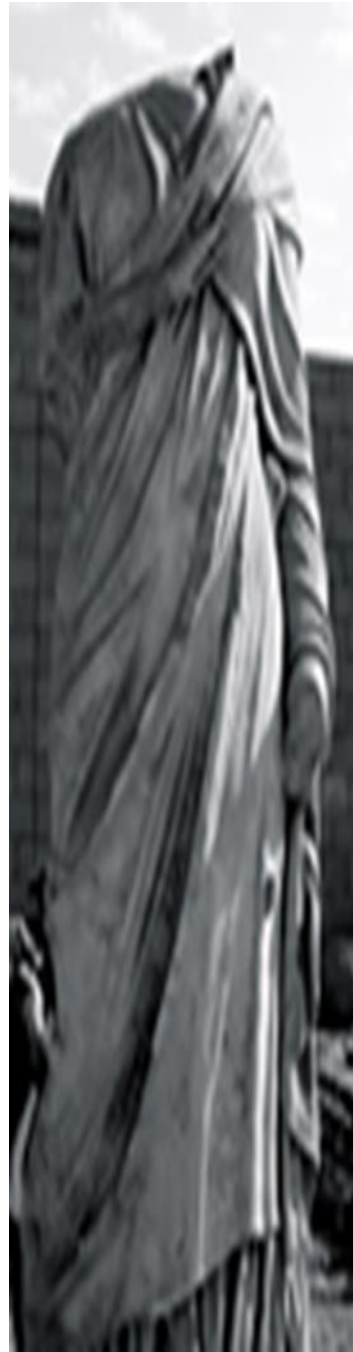
Pl. 2- Archaeological sites, quarries and monasteries

After (Geens, 2007b), p.80.



Pl.3- Colossal statue of Mrit-Amun standing in the Akhmim Open-Air Museum

After (Geens, 2007a), p. 17

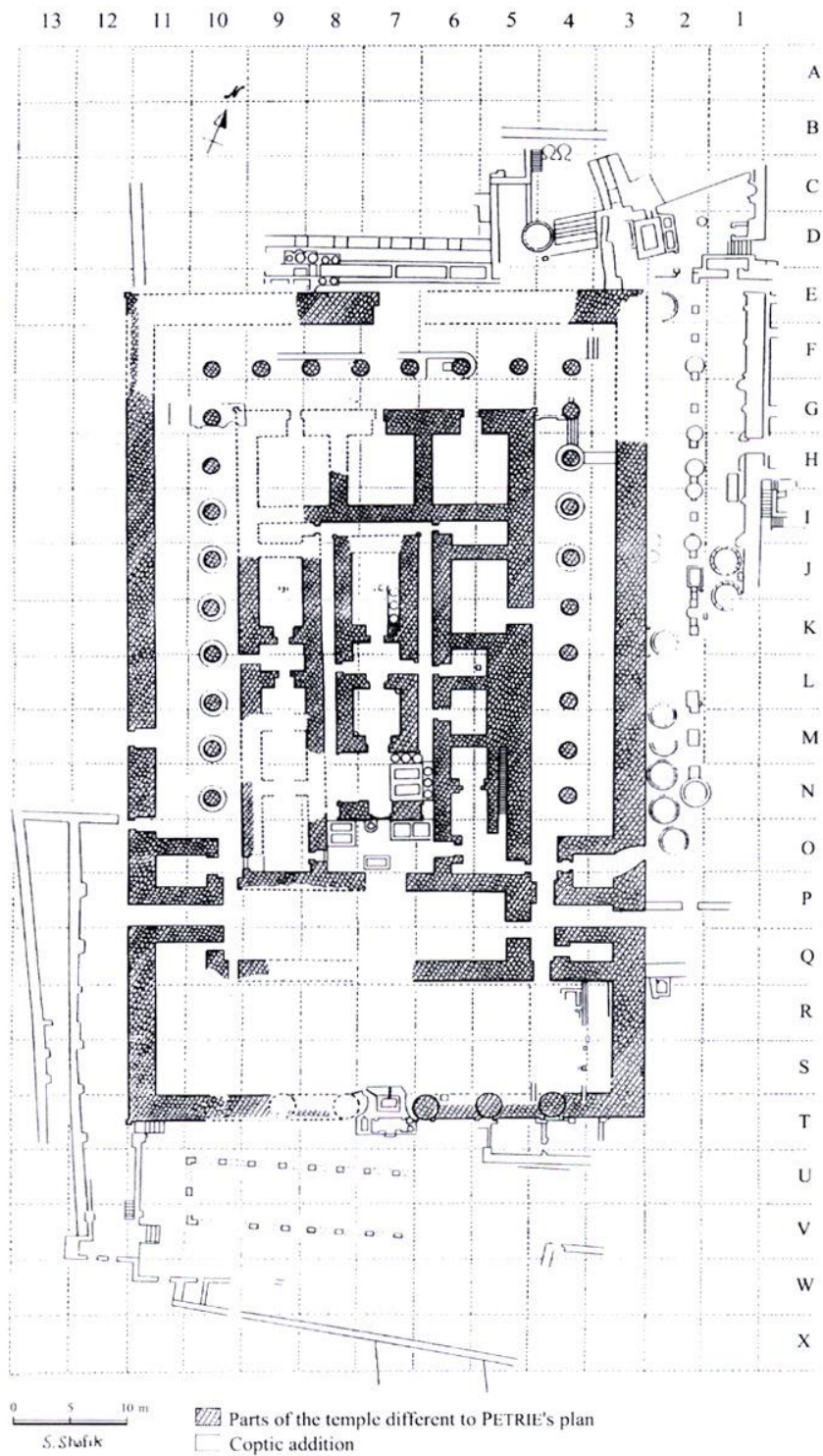


Pl. 4- Remains of the Ramasside temple and seated colossus of Ramesses II (left), Roman statue of Venus (?), (right) in the Open-Air Museum at Akhmim

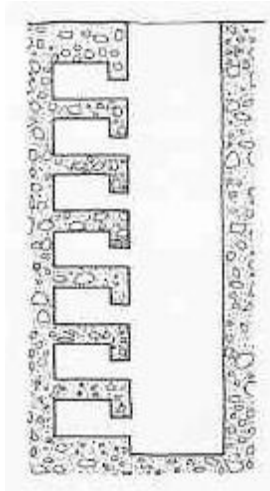
After (Geens, 2007a), p. 18.



Pl.5- Map of the site of Athribis, after (Geens, 2007a), p. 24

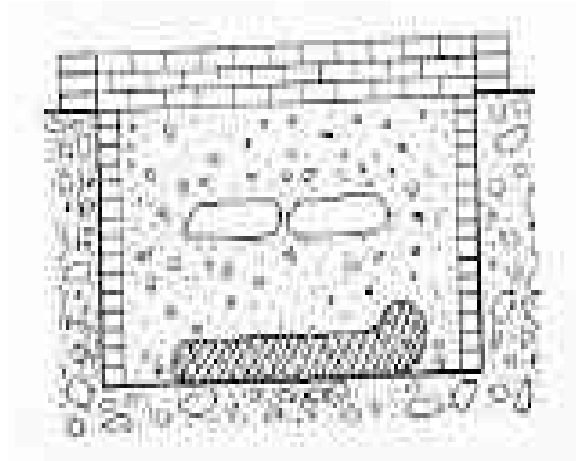


Pl.6- Plan of the temple of Ptolemy XII Auletes at Athribis, after (El-Masry, 2001), p. 212.



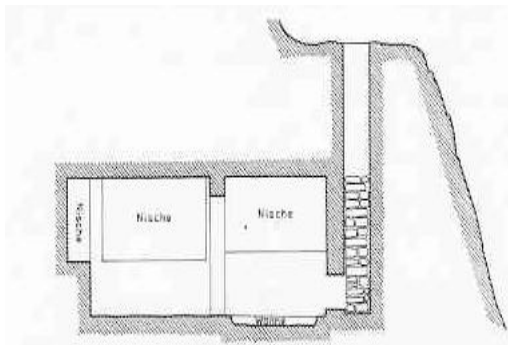
Pl.7- tomb type A 1-b,

**after (Kuhlmann, 1983), p. 61,
fig.16**



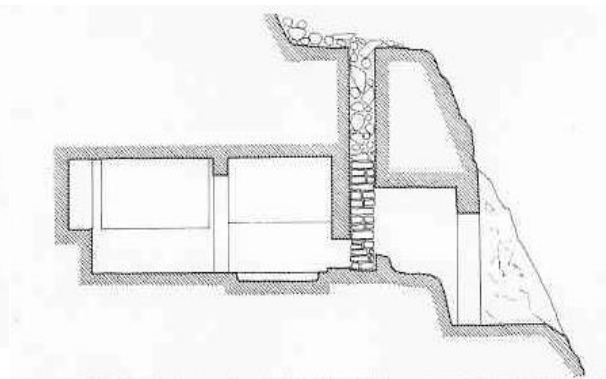
Pl.8- tomb type A-3

after (Kuhlmann, 1983), p.63, fig. 17



Pl.9- tomb type C2,

**after (Kuhlmann, 1983), p. 77, fig
25**



Pl.10- tomb type C3,

after (Kuhlmann, 1983). P.78, fig.27

أخميم "بانوبوليس" في العصر اليوناني الروماني: دراسة تاريخية وأثرية والتنمية السياحية المحلية

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الملخص العربي

تقع مدينة أخميم أو بانوبوليس اليونانية على بعد حوالي ٤٥٠ كيلومتر جنوب القاهرة على الضفة الغربية للنيل بمحافظة سوهاج. تبعد أخميم أيضاً حوالي ٤٠ ميلاً عن مدينة سوهاج. لمدينة أخميم تاريخ عريق يرجع إلى عصر ما قبل الأسرات. ازدهرت أخميم في العصور المصرية القديمة واليونانية-الرومانية و القبطية والإسلامية. كانت أخميم عاصمة الإقليم التاسع من أقاليم مصر العليا. ولد الملك أى من الأسرة الثامنة عشر في أخميم وكذلك الشاعر اليوناني نونوس. ذكر استرابون اليوناني وجود صناعة للنسيج في هذه المدينة. أهم المواقع الأثرية في أخميم جبانة الحواويش وجبانة السلاموني وكهف بان ومعبد مكرس لعبادة أمون-رع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أخميم، بانوبوليس، مصر، العصر اليوناني، الروماني، تاريخ، آثار.