

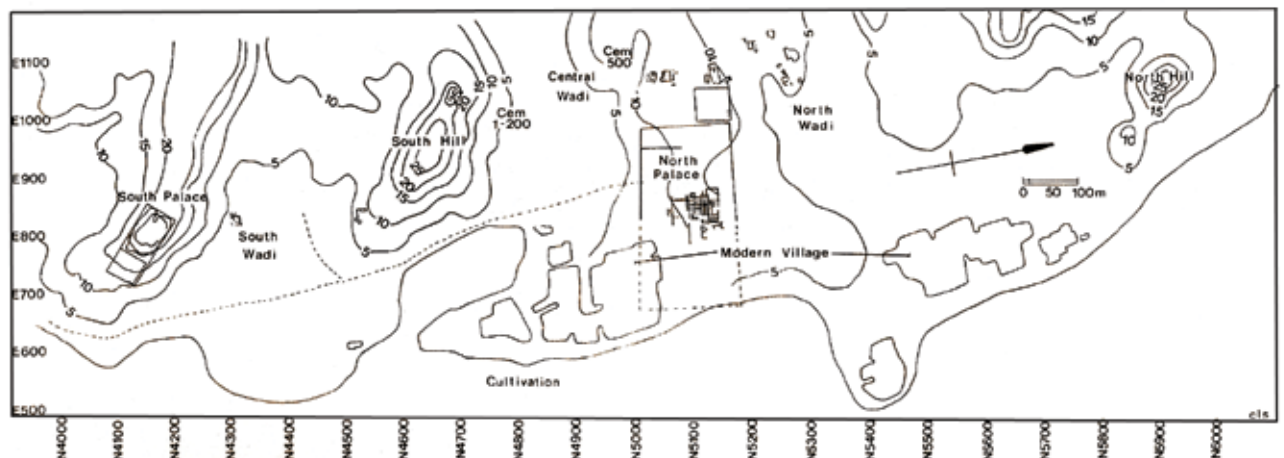
The Egyptian empire strikes back

Once a military base for imperial expansion in Egypt's New Kingdom, Deir el-Ballas now faces a new threat: encroaching urban sprawl.

Peter Lacovara tells CWA why this city-palace must be preserved.

Deir el-Ballas was a short-lived royal city-palace built by Theban kings as a military base for imperial campaigns against the Hyksos, a group of foreign rulers who had taken control of northern (Lower) Egypt during a period of national weakness at the end of the Middle Kingdom. It was excavated at the beginning of the 20th century by American archaeologist George Andrew Reisner, better known for his many discoveries in the Nile Valley and at the Giza necropolis. Reisner uncovered a large royal palace, a settlement, and cemeteries dating to the late Second Intermediate Period and the early 18th Dynasty, during the second half of the 16th centuries BC. Regrettably, he did not publish his results. In the 1980s, the Museum

RIGHT Site plan of the excavations at Deir el-Ballas.

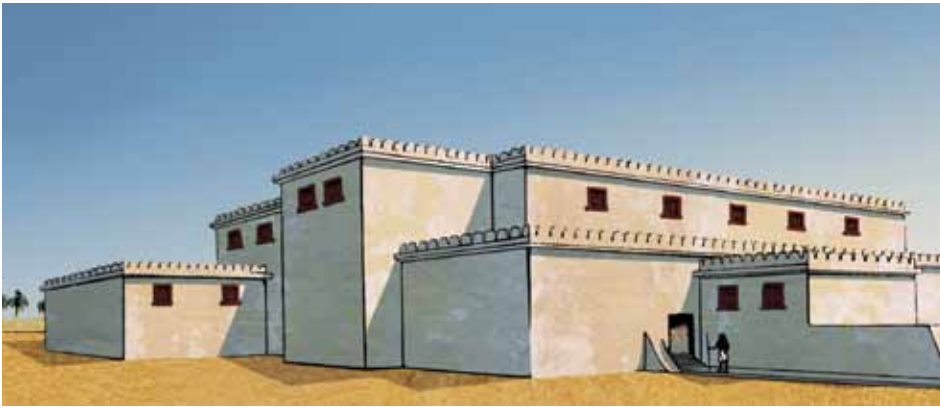


ABOVE The North Palace today, suffering encroachment from modern construction.

INSET A dagger, now in the Phoebe A Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, from one of the caches of weapons and models of weapons found during the original excavations at Deir el-Ballas.

of Boston sponsored a new expedition, led by Peter Lacovara, which revealed the site was considerably larger than had been suggested by Reisner.

Strategically located at a bend in the Nile, the city-palace lies on the west bank of the river just north of Thebes and about 20km south of Dendara, and takes advantage of the local topography for maximum symbolic and practical effect. The royal residence – the



LEFT A reconstruction (by Fran Weatherhead and Andrew Boyce) of the North Palace, showing its raised central core and crenellated battlements.

BELOW The 'South Palace' was recently vandalised by looters, who dug this triangular hole into the façade.

North Palace – was built at the midpoint of a large semicircle of limestone cliffs that border the low desert, with clusters of residential buildings to the north and south of it, a layout reflected in later royal cities such as Amenhotep III's Malkata and Tell el-Amarna.

The full size of the settlement is unknown, as the eastern end of the site, which extends into agricultural land, remains uncovered. However, at least 45,000m² of the North Palace and its enclosures have been recorded, and pottery and other finds suggest it enjoyed a brief existence in the Late Second Intermediate Period. The palace itself is made of unusually large mud bricks, about 54cm × 27cm × 18cm, and comprises a series of columned courts and a long entrance hall, grouped around an elevated central platform.

This platform was constructed on casemate foundations: long mud-brick chambers filled in with rubble and capped by a brick pavement. Some of these casemates survive to a height of about 5m. They once supported the raised private apartments of the palace, which would have given it the appearance of a fortified 'Migdol' tower, a typical design mirrored by other Egyptian New Kingdom palaces.

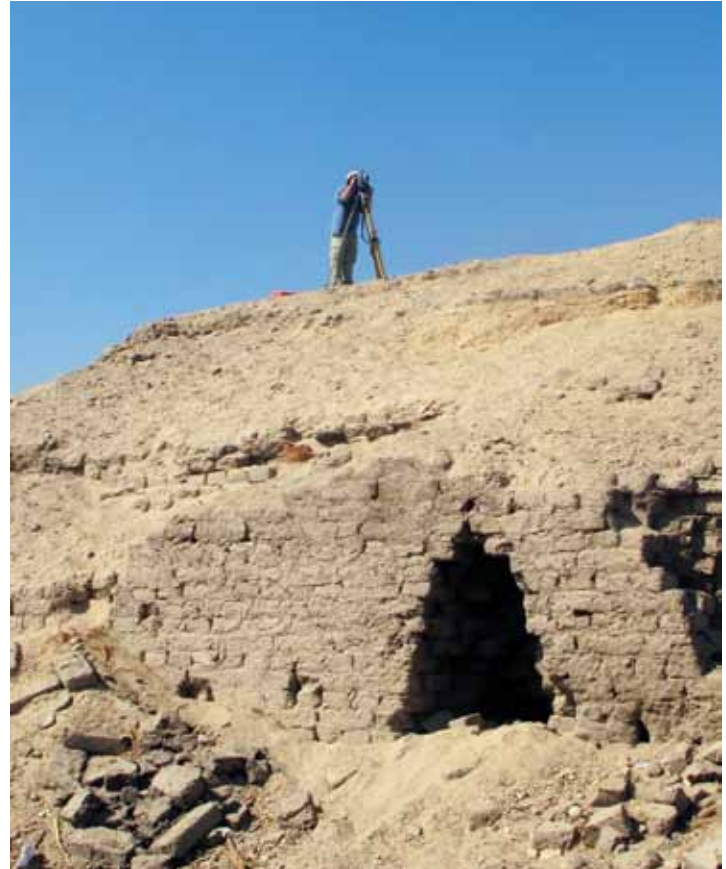
As at Amarna and Deir el-Medina, Deir el-Ballas had a workmen's village situated apart from the main settled area. A series of roughly built stone and mud-brick structures, consisting of one or more courts connected by short flights of stairs, were cut into the hillside. They closely resemble the layout of chapels found in the workmen's village at Amarna.

The southern extent of the settlement at Deir el-Ballas was marked by a large, rectangular mud-brick platform. Reisner called this the 'South Palace', but it is clearly non-residential in character. Situated at the top of the hill, far from the rest of the settlement, it enjoyed commanding views of the Nile and surrounding countryside. The building has a wide terrace, fronting an elevated platform measuring about 40m wide and 150m long, with a broad flight of stairs leading to the top. Though the upper section of the platform, which has been all but destroyed by centuries of looting, probably supported reed structures or tents rather than a substantial construction.

Watchpost on the Nile

The design and location of the 'South Palace' suggest that, rather than a palace, it was an observation tower, keeping watch over the river and the southern approach to the settlement, and monitoring traffic entering the settlement. It was also an ideal post from which to watch the movement of the Theban fleet.

A collection of inscribed potsherds, or ostraca, were recovered from Deir el-Ballas. These confirm that the forces for the attack on the Hyksos capital were marshalled here, and describe the large quantities of goods and personnel that were brought to the site,



including cattle, men, possibly weapons, and, most interestingly, a roster of ships and their crews.

The Kamose Stela – Kamose was the last king of the Theban 17th Dynasty, who reigned 1555-1550 BC – mentions the assembly of the Theban fleet at a place called Per-djed-ken, which may well be the original name for Deir el-Ballas; another text mentions a royal residence at Sedjefatawy that belonged to Ahmose, the Theban king credited with driving out the Hyksos. With the success of the Thebans, the city-palace at Deir el-Ballas was no longer necessary, and was swiftly abandoned.

Hopefully, future fieldwork in the area will fill in the gaps to our understanding of this critical period in the history of Thebes. However, the expansion of the neighbouring modern town threatens to destroy what remains of the site unless urgent preservation and protection procedures are put in place. A grant from the American Research Center in Egypt will secure much-needed conservation work on the 'South Palace' later this year, along with more restoration and site-security measures, and we look forward to reporting on further finds from Deir el-Ballas in future issues of CWA. ■

Peter Lacovara, The Ancient Egyptian Heritage and Archaeology Fund