

## QURNA – MORE PIECES OF AN UNFINISHED HISTORY

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*When the full story is written of how the wealth of Theban history came to be discovered and recorded, there are some individuals who will have chapters devoted to them. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century one will be Joseph Bonomi, and for the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Kent Weeks will have a very full one to himself. The Theban hills have a magnetism that draws people to devote large parts of their working lives here, and Thebes has been very fortunate to have had Kent, and also Susan, bringing their scholarship, vision, enthusiasm, determination, and kindness.*

Early in my own fascination with Qurnawi history I realised I needed to speak to Dr Weeks. In 1996 I had not met him; he was for me the famous archaeologist who ran the Theban Mapping Project, taught at the American University in Cairo and was a prodigious scholar who had worked here for decades. But undeterred, I made an appointment to see him to talk about my work on the recent history of Qurna. He was interested and enthusiastic to find out more about the last period of life on the hillside. He had been – in my view – fortunate to have originally studied the more inclusive anthropology and archaeology and was not totally obsessed, as some archaeologists are, only with the long dead. He at once saw how valuable a study of both the existing early sources and the local history could be to the record of this UNESCO listed world cultural heritage site. The encouragement and support I have received from Kent and Susan has been a great factor in continuing my rather spasmodic work. Susan's recent death is a very great loss to her family and friends but also to the study of Egypt, and of Qurna in particular.

Kent and Susan worked together in Nubia in the mid-1960s and although they were on ancient sites they would have been very aware that the culture and history of the more recent, and displaced, Nubians had an equal validity in the grand picture. This holistic view of local culture can be seen on the Theban Mapping Project's award-winning web site, which covers not only the Valley and its tombs and ancient beliefs and rituals but has articles on the modern Theban wall paintings of the Hajj painters and the 'rituals' of making Aish Shamsi. The contemporary material for these articles was and is found in the Theban West Bank, but

surprisingly most of the evidence for the history of the last few hundred years of Thebes/Qurna is found elsewhere.

For Kent Weeks to do the archaeological work he has done it was necessary for him to be in Egypt. Indeed, it is usual when searching for the history of a place to start there, on the ground, either by recording and analysing what is there in the built fabric and oral tradition, or by excavating, recording and analysing the previously unseen. This holds true for all the periods of Theban history except the most modern. For reasons that are historical and political, the known and recorded history lies outside Qurna/Thebes and mainly outside Egypt, and because I still live and work in the United Kingdom I have tickled away at these later periods as and when I have been able to. Qurna's history was seldom recorded for its own sake, but certain incidents, anecdotes, drawings and snap-shots were noted as a by-product and for other reasons. It is written in languages that are foreign to the people whose history it is, and held in books, archives and personal collections that they will never see or have access to. While this has also been the case for some other indigenous peoples in remote – and often colonised - areas, it is odd when the Theban West Bank must have had the world's largest number of professional and amateur seekers of history concentrated in one small area over nearly two hundred years. This article looks at some of the sources that have been used to create what history we do have and also suggests areas for further search, even at this late stage.

I began searching in 1996 for answers to the questions of who are the Qurnawi, how long have they been here, what is the truth behind what were often ugly stories of illicit digging and antiquities thefts, why are there still plans for their resettlement, and what are those plans? Since then there has been a major contribution to Qurnawi studies in the 1997-1999 fieldwork and thesis of Kees van der Spek (Van der Spek 2004). For the first time Qurna and the Qurnawi were put in the centre of an historical and intellectual spotlight; at last the archival and literary history was dissected and analysed in the context of an ethnographic study of the contemporary community, and we look forward to its forthcoming publication 'The Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun - History, Life and Work in the Villages of the Theban West Bank' (AUC press forthcoming).

However, such is the scattered and varied nature of the sources that there is much still to do in Qurnawi studies. This essay is about the collection of this data, the piecing together of it, and finally the possibilities for collecting further valuable fragments of information. It is very seldom that any historical sleuth finds a complete un-robbed tomb, undamaged site or complete undiscovered library; most of us have to work only with fragments.

In the summer of 2009 at a conference in Durham, England, I was shown a pencil portrait. Mrs Neville-Rolfe, great granddaughter of Joseph Bonomi, had recently been given a small collection of drawings and papers by a cousin and I was keen to see if it held anything 'new' on Qurna. Joseph Bonomi was a sculptor and artist who worked in Egypt, in particular in Thebes, for many years during the 1820s, 30s and 40s. At different times he was employed by both Robert Hay (1824-26, and 1832-34) and by Karl Richard Lepsius (1842-3). He kept meticulous notes and made thousands of drawings and sketches recording not only the ancient monuments – which was his paid work – but also local people, animals and places. He was

interested in both people and history, and understood the potential value of local place names and oral history. He was much loved by Qurnawi and called ‘Aboo Nom’ (Father of Sleep or a pun on that and the abbreviation of his name) or Aboo Youssef Noni’ ‘el hhakim Inglesi’ – Father Joseph Noni, the wise Englishman. (YATES 1843). Although many of Bonomi’s drawings and papers are now in British archive collections, such as the Griffith Institute (Oxford) and the British Library Manuscripts, some are still with the family, also in the United Kingdom.

The family collection includes this fine pencil portrait in profile of an old man with most distinctive features (FIG. 1). Underneath is written in Arabic that this is Mansour el-Hashash, and in English is written El bab el Malek. The date is unknown but is likely to be c. 1830 when Bonomi says he was collecting his Topographical Notes for which Mansour el-Hashash appears to have been one source of his information. Some ten years ago I spent two days in Mrs Neville-Rolfe’s cellar examining a trunk-full of diaries, letters and odd notes. (It was an appropriate subterranean repository for the personal papers of a man who had spent so long working and living in tombs). A loose page of this old Bonomi collection says that “Mansour Ashash was born in 1136” – 1723 in the Gregorian calendar. So we have a portrait of a Qurnawi who was fourteen when two of the earliest European visitors, Pococke and Norden, visited Thebes – perhaps he saw them. And we have further evidence of this centenarian, as Bonomi was not the only long standing resident to record this elderly Qurnawi. Giovanni d’Athenasi (Yanni) wrote in his book of 1836, “Both sexes live very commonly to the age of a hundred. I know one of the name of Mansour Elhassas, who was in his hundred and eighteenth year, and who walked extremely well, rode on horseback like a young man, and had extremely sharp sight. His son has been thirteen years in my service; he has been appointed primate of the village, his father-in-law having resigned that office” (D’ATHENASI 1836: 133). There are many stories of the long-lived Qurnawi and recent medical research has confirmed that longevity does indeed run in families (Long Life Family Study <http://www.longlifefamilystudy.org>).

Mansour and his descendants, the wider Hashashiin family, lived in Horubat, on the north side of Sheikh abd el-Qurna, where they had a family *zawyeh* – a separate, community-owned building where the extended family could meet for social and religious events - now recorded on the display of the Zawaya of Qurna (<http://www.qurna.org/images/zawyeh.pdf>). By coincidence it was in this *zawyeh* that the exhibition about Qurna “Living Villages in the City of the Dead” was first put up in 1997 for Qurnawis to see and to use (<http://www.qurna.org/discovery.html>).

Knowledgeable elder Qurnawi today recount that Mansour el-Hashash was famous for knowing a great deal about the monuments and was given the ‘title’ Nasr by other Qurnawi, one that has stuck to the family to this day. Nasr is the title used for a head teacher, a man who knows a lot. Family members today, who have been shown the portrait, have been surprised to see the strong facial similarities between the earlier descendants of Mansour that they had known and Mansour as drawn by Bonomi. The phrase ‘El bab el Malek’ is unclear but may refer to where Bonomi was when he drew the portrait or possibly to Mansour’s unofficial role as quasi-chief guardian.

It is unusual for working-class or farming families anywhere to have portraits drawn of their early 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century ancestors. It is also unusual for foreign artists of that time to draw portraits of local people and also give them a name and thus record their identity and history for posterity. Sometimes the visiting artist writes the place name, and more often 'a native', 'a farmer' or 'native girl carrying water' but almost never a personal name. However, such was the close relationship that longer-stay travellers and residents had with some Qurnawi, that Mansour el-Hashash was not the only elderly Qurnawi to have his portrait drawn – Nestor L'Hôte drew Sheikh Awad on his visit in 1828-30 (1993). Not only is there a drawn portrait of Awad but we also have a photo c. 1868 of the old Sheikh with his long pipe sitting on the hillside (KEIMER 1955).

Sheikh Awad was a famous guide who lived in Horubat close to Yanni and Wilkinson and was over 99 when he died. Though not immediate family he was a 'cousin' of Mansour el-Hashash. In 1833 he was in charge of Wilkinson's House when Edward William Lane and a friend each paid him "15 piastres a month for his services" (LANE 1833). We know that he was employed by Lepsius and Brugsch and was Champollion's foreman on the west bank. Lepsius recounts in his letters that he was told by "my guide, the excellent old 'Aquad,'" of a feud between the family of the Sheikh of Qurna - to which he belonged - and a family in Beyrat which had resulted in his getting beaten up in a recent affray (LEPSIUS 1853 271, 321-322). The enmity between these two adjacent villages is mentioned time and again by travellers. Sonnini in the late 1770s is told by the Sheikh of Qurna to be careful of the people of Beyrat as they and the Qurnawi are at war; and this is some 75 years before Awad's family problems. Animosity between clans exists to the present day, as recounted by Van der Spek, though reasons for its cause vary.

There is a detailed discussion about Awad and his age by Ludwig Keimer in his article about the Theban Visitors' Book (KEIMER 1955). Awad told Franz Wallner in 1872 that he had been married ten or twelve times and had more than forty children. It is not surprising that when Qurna Discovery held a small party in 2001 to introduce Bonomi's great grand-daughter to the descendants of Bonomi's old friend Awad, we found that a large number of Horubat Qurnawi were descended from him. We made a small display about the two men and gave the senior descendants a certificate that included the portraits of both men, as a record of the day (FIG. 2). The family portrait, the original now in archives in Paris, was back in the Qurna family via London, and new international friendships were started across the generations.

Friendship and family provide us with perhaps the earliest photo of an Upper Egyptian rural woman whose name and family are known. It is in an unlikely book on Coptic history, *The Light of Egypt* by Robert de Rustafjaell (1909). There are many close-up plates of Coptic manuscripts that can only be of interest to the very learned, but there are also two photos taken by the author in Qurna c.1907. One is of Ahmed Abd er-Rasul as an old man at the entrance to the tomb where he and his brothers had found their famous collection of royal mummies in the early 1870s, and the next photo is a group portrait of his family (FIG. 3).

This wonderful photo shows four generations of the family: Ahmed then an old man (said to be 90), a daughter carrying a baby girl, and Ahmed's very elderly mother Fendia (said to be 120). His daughter modestly pulls her smart woven shawl to cover half her face, but Fendia sits in the centre of the photo, supporting herself on two strong sticks, face uncovered, looking directly and seriously at the camera. She is wearing earrings – probably wedding gold – and shoes! In 1907 few village people would have worn shoes at all, certainly very few women would have had shoes. They are traditional peasant shoes, made from the hard part of a palm frond, but shoes none the less. Fendia appears very conscious of the significance of having her photo taken by a learned foreign friend of her son. She seems to be showing herself to the world as the powerful woman that she is, and distancing herself from the other women of the village with her shoes. She also exposes her neck and part of her upper body. She is a very old woman, her body is no longer of any sexual attraction, as long as she is decent she has no need to worry about covering herself like her granddaughter. Many women in Qurna still avoid cameras, partly from modesty but mainly from fear and mistrust of the power of the camera and of the 'stolen' image itself or the use it could be put to, but there is no fear here. It is an amazing photo of an elderly woman – any woman, but especially one from rural Upper Egypt.

Taken out of context it is intrinsically a fine photo; but this, like the portraits of Mansour el-Hashash and Sheikh Awad, is far more special. This is a woman we know about from written records of travellers and scholars - she was mentioned in Charles Wilbour's letters, when Ahmed took him home for tea in 1884. Stories still circulate in the family about this formidable woman with a mind of her own. She is remembered for standing up to the most powerful men in Horubāt – Omda Lazim and Hassan Hashash. She also took another husband when she was over 60, much to the disapproval of this closely knit traditional community. Even allowing for some exaggeration as to her age, Fendia was probably around 100 years old at the time of this photo. Fendia's name reflects a Turkish/Ottoman descent. She was from an Atiyat family – originally in Tarif and then mostly on Dra abul Naga – but what her full ancestry was is unclear, however, the Turkish connection could have been something that distinguished her in the hillside community, and might have led to her unusual confidence. At this time she lived with son Ahmed in a '*bet el-hagar*' – literally a stone-house or tomb dwelling - in a New Kingdom tomb just to the north of the tomb of Sennufer on Sheikh abd el-Qurna. Fendia had five sons and two daughters by Abd er-Rasul and her vast extended family of descendants lived until recently in houses below and around her old house where she was photographed flanked by her son, granddaughter and great grandchild one hundred years ago.

Very few people anywhere have photos of family members who were alive at the time of Napoleon, perhaps even before Mohammed Ali became viceroy of Egypt. Most people do not even have photos of their grandmothers, many more do not have photos of their great, or great, great grand-mothers. But the extended family of the Abd er-Rasuls have Fendia's portrait. Most old photographs of rural women anywhere were taken by passing strangers - tourists or professional photographers - to illustrate 'foreign' costume, looks or customs. The identities of individual subjects were of no interest and not known; even the much-photographed young

Bishariin women of Aswan have no names. Photos were not taken by other family members as cameras were not a common personal or family possession, and in many places, including Qurna, only the recent mobile phone-camera has changed this. It was also very unusual for someone to take a family group portrait because this level of interest, mutual trust and friendship was seldom established. Robert de Rustafjaell had known Ahmed Abd er-Rasul for many years, and on this visit he was invited home for tea. It would be fascinating to know whether it was Robert or Ahmed or perhaps Fendia who suggested taking a photograph, and whether she herself ever saw a copy of it.

The villagers of Qurna would have been some of the first rural people to see cameras in the early 1850s, because the temples and tombs were a magnet for the earliest photographers. However, photographers were mostly interested only in those tombs and temples, and local people featured in the images served primarily to give scale to the monuments. Nonetheless, some images of daily life of the people in the area were made by photographers such as Ernst Benecke and Félix Teynard (GOLIA 2010). Some Egyptologists took photos of their excavations that show their workers, but generally no names are given, and others took group portraits of the all male mission staff, where yet again the local Egyptians remain nameless. Many excavation reports of the early 20th century show armies of workers with many young boys, often in clouds of dust. Some photographers were interested in ‘local life and customs’, and took photos of peasants ploughing, waterwheels, markets and the like, and because so many tourists came to Luxor there was a ready sale for postcards of local as well as antique scenes. Many of these postcards, now eagerly bought by collectors in specialist fairs around the world and on web sites, also show the only portraits of people who can be traced if the images are returned to Qurna. Before all the knowledge vanishes, now that the Qurnawi no longer live in the foothills, it would be a fine project to systematically trace and document these people. For example, a set of small, untitled photos bought in Egypt by a British tourist in 1924 includes the only photo of the elderly Daramalli working the family *sāqiya*. He lived with his extended family on Sheikh abd el-Qurna beside Yanni’s house – the front wall of the compound clearly visible in a photo taken by Joseph Milne in 1895 (Milne). A tourist postcard of the mid 1950s shows a labourer ploughing with a wooden plough pulled by a cow and a camel with the Theban foothills in the background. This is the only known photo of Hassan abu el-Azab, an employee of the Rasul family who always worked with a cow and a camel which was relatively unusual, but by no means unique. This particular cow was renowned for being very strong and working for many years. Another postcard sold in Egypt in the 1930s is titled “Assouan – Native well for irrigations”, (FIG. 4) but the identification of the area is wrong- it is Qurna again. The very identifiable southern slope of the Qurn is clearly visible in the background, Qurnet Marei on the hillside and Medinet Habu in the far left. One man is probably Mahmoud Hassan Omran, but so far there is no agreement about exactly who the two men are working the *sāqiya*. Qurna Discovery’s exhibition panel on the *sāqiya* of Qurna has ten early 20th century photos (collected in the United Kingdom) of different ones on the plain, most with clear photos of individual Qurnawi, many of whose families can identify their

ancestors (Fig. 5).<sup>1</sup> The many *sāqiya* that were on the plain are there no longer, though the wooden wheels themselves are not destroyed and one can find them propped up against walls, beside the roads, or sometimes just left in the field. Their powerful association with life-giving water – life itself – means that they are not broken or burnt or otherwise disposed of.

What is the point of all these details? Sadly there is no Qurna equivalent to Nessim Henry Henein's (2001) superb study, *Mari Girgis – Village de Haute-Égypte*, for which the fieldwork took place 1971-73. The patterns of Qurnawi agricultural life, shown in the early photos and unchanged for generations, have now completely changed. The irrigation of the fields is no longer done by the water-wheels, tractors have taken over from the cows and camels, the inundation no longer creates the annual cycle and now the families have moved from the hillside and their houses are so much dust. The information that can be gathered from contemporary illustrations are what aspects of Qurna history will be written from, just as the tomb scenes of sowing and ploughing tell us of the agricultural lives of earlier residents. Robert Hay's panoramas of the 1820s (HAY MSS), which are almost as good as photographs, are of the hillside and not the valley, and so only a few indistinct *sāqiya* can be seen, although there is a good number of cows and goats being led to and from the valley and small herds grazing down on the valley margin. The panoramas and associated drawings are amazing snapshots of the daily life of Qurna, in so many ways unchanged until recently. Generations of Qurnawi have been employed by Kent Weeks and his colleagues and for most of them this seasonal work will only be a part of their income, much as those early 19<sup>th</sup> century labourers being observed by Europeans in Turkish costume also worked on the land and carved souvenirs for tourists in their tomb-houses at night.

It is necessary to have illustrations of agriculture and animal husbandry because some much-quoted early travellers wrote that that the Qurnawi did not cultivate. Sonnini in the late 1770s wrote that, "following no trade, without taste for agriculture ... appearing to live solely by rapine" (1800: 240). However, Sonnini sat in the village purchasing antiquities and would not have discussed fields and harvests, was there for a short period of time, and was worrying about the civil unrest between Mamluks and the locals, rather than the local economy. It is highly unlikely that such fertile soil would have been uncultivated, and from other sources it is clear that many of the Qurnawi owned land. In 1830, Bonomi, who can be relied upon, writes "The number of cultivators in the village of Gurna who pay the land tax is 224 ..." (BONOMI MSS) and Rhind writes of Qurnawi life in 1855, "Nearly all of them are the owners of such live stock as I have mentioned; and they all have a portion of land in the fruitful valley" (RHIND 1862: 295-6).

The muddled thinking of many of those who wrote about the Qurnawi is clearly shown in a few short quotes from Amelia B. Edwards. Her very readable and enjoyable book was a best seller, and would have been necessary holiday reading for many who also travelled to Egypt.

<sup>1</sup> Qurna Discovery is a collection of permanent exhibitions about Qurna, located on Sheikh abd el-Qurna and opened in 2001. It is a joint Qurnawi/UK project and supported internationally by The Friends of Qurna Discovery, see [www.qurna.org](http://www.qurna.org)

Her views would have coloured their views of local people also. “Side by side with the work of production goes on the work of excavation. The professed diggers colonise the western bank. They live rent-free among the tombs; drive donkeys or work *shadufs* by day, and spend their nights searching for treasure. Some hundreds of families live in this grim way, spoiling the dead and gone Egyptians for a livelihood” (EDWARDS 1888: 387). So much is derogatory about this. They are ‘professed’ diggers – they pretend or wrongly claim to be diggers – while in fact they are indeed the labourers employed by foreigners who would certainly not soil their fine clothes or hands with such work. They ‘colonise’ the west bank – it does not belong to them, they are intruders, have taken over – whereas it is the foreign collectors and archaeologists that are the colonialists. They live ‘rent-free’ – they are squatters, illegal inhabitants – while they are the local people who have lived here for generations. Having mentioned at least three types of income generating work she then states that it is their ‘spoiling’ of the dead that is their livelihood. People did not drive donkeys or work *shadufs* for no reason, and that reason was farming. Twenty pages later she writes lyrically of the land between the Nile and the hills, “Every inch of arable ground is turned to account. All that grows, grows lustily. .... Barley ripples .... Next comes plantations of tobacco, cotton, hemp, linseed, maize and lentils, so closely set, so rich in promise, that the country looks as if it were laid out in allotment grounds for miles together. ... a little village nestles close by...” (EDWARDS 1888: 387). It is sad that she cannot give the credit for these fruits of their labour to those hard working Qurnawi who are so adept at multi-tasking. In common with so many who have written about the Qurnawi she is unable to see or understand that it is the same people, albeit living in slightly different places in the area, that inhabit both the pastoral world and that of the hillside tombs. In the same chapter she recounts in detail, and some glee the finding of new mummies and of antiquity hunting, “The game it is true was prohibited; but we enjoyed it none the less because it was illegal. Perhaps we enjoyed it the more.” (EDWARDS 1888: 423). Yet it is the Qurnawi who work for the travellers and collectors that she calls mummy snatchers who beguile them ‘into one den after another’. Amelia B. Edwards is a great wordsmith, as attested by her works of fiction, suggesting in the one word ‘den’ that the Qurnawi are both thieves and wild, savage animals. However this clever, confident woman appears to have little insight.

Another way in which foreigners gave the Qurnawi a bad name was to accuse them of being lax in religious matters. From the earliest detailed maps of Thebes by Wilkinson and Lane, which were until recently only in British manuscript collections, we know that there was a mosque just south of the temple of Seti I, but generations of travellers and writers followed Belzoni in being blind to both the mosque and the deep seated religious beliefs of the Qurnawi (VAN DER SPEK 2004; SIMPSON 2003; [www.qurna.org/articles](http://www.qurna.org/articles)). Belzoni’s book was also a best seller in its day and encouraged many tourists to come to Egypt to see the monuments, where they would be guided and assisted by these misunderstood locals. In truth it is hard to over-estimate the importance of the spiritual world and all its manifestations to the Qurnawi. It underlies all thought and action. Religious observance and local religious allegiances involve a large amount of time, energy and debate. Not only are there mosques and Sheikh’s shrines



(Sheikh on Abd el-Qurna for a start), but the ground is full of *jimns* as is the mountain with its caverns. The physical remains of spiritual beliefs and observances are of major importance to history in all periods, but here many have been cleared away without due record. In addition we should try to understand and appreciate the magical, mystical and religious significance of not only the built but the geographical features of this ‘sacred landscape’ right up to the present. The importance of high places, the relationships between them, the spaces created by the landscape are all important, not only in the ancient periods but on until the present day.

The early mosque, Gamae el-Amri or Amr Ibn el-Aas--just off the south east corner of Seti I temple--is said to have been built by Amr, the general of the Arab army of 641. The invaders did not commit mass slaughter, rape and pillage like the French in 1799 (<http://www.qurna.org/article5.htm>), but they did bring their new religion and established places for its observance where they could in the Nile Valley. They will have recognised that here, on the Theban foothills, there were many impressive buildings of earlier religions and would have been keen to leave an Islamic one, however small, in a prominent position. It is likely that the main population was living close by, and I suggest that this specific site was chosen to mark the superiority of the new religion. From its roof you would have been able to see all the main monasteries of the Christians, as well as the temples of the long dead Pharaohs. What is certain is that the mosque was a square, probably domed, building and was already a ruin by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A new mosque was built on the site about twenty years ago with no archaeological investigation being made in the area, but it may be possible to locate drawings or photos of the ruin with its big walls, which was still a place of visitation and prayer until the rebuilding. The old village site in and around the courtyard of the temple was also systematically cleared in the archaeological excavations of 1914 and more recently from the 1970s through the 1990s, and by the government clearances of the late 1990s.

This lack of respect for the post-Roman eras of Theban history is nothing new. Somers Clarke records that in 1893/4 the Director General of Antiquities (then Jacques de Morgan), continuing the “works of destruction begun by others”, had torn the Coptic Church out of the Medinet Habu temple without recording it (CLARKE 1912). A similar fate befell the Coptic wall paintings in the great court and hypostyle hall of Luxor temple and the Coptic monastery buildings at Der el Bahari. Of the wall paintings he writes, “it was a piece of unscientific barbarism to break them up without even procuring careful copies” (CLARKE 1912: 190). Again the only visual evidence we have for all these is in a few old photos and drawings.

There are some historic Qurnawi buildings that do survive and where work should be done on the ground. In the modern Muslim cemetery to the north of the Seti I temple there are three old domed *sheikhs’* tombs (mud-brick shrines to holy men). They are illustrated in the Hay drawings, and mentioned by Lane and other travellers. Two are much older than the third – architect and Egyptologist Horst Jaritz says one of these is Fatimid (personal communication). Both need proper recording, conservation and repair. The third is the walled complex of Sheikh Taia, revered by the people of Tarif (the area to the north of the cemetery), and contains a number of small structures including the domed tomb of the *sheikh* himself. Detailed work on

the oral history of Sheikh Taia will throw light on the relationship between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century dwellers of Tarif and those of hillside Qurna.

Also in the modern cemetery, close to the Fatimid *sheikh*, is another free-standing structure – a mud-brick *minbar* (FIG. 6). In the distant past it was used to say the prayers at the Eids, but these are no longer held in the cemetery. The *minbar* is so ancient that its purpose is no longer recognised, and is called ‘the tomb of the camel’ (its arches do resemble a camel’s hump), and there is a local legend about a travelling sheikh with a camel who died there. It is now only used as an emergency toilet. It used to have a freestanding arch at the front, but the top has collapsed, though the sides remain. Photographs and measurements showing the bricks forming the springing of the arch exist (author’s personal collection) so it could be reconstructed and repaired. So far no parallels have been found to this odd little structure, and like much of mud-brick Qurna it is very vulnerable.

Sheikh abd er-Rahman, the learned sufi who ran the first school in Qurna at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and whose library and *zawyeh* existed until 2008 (SIMPSON 2003: 247, PL 147) had his tomb-shrine in Horubat, east of the tomb of Ramose and just behind the Horubat mosque. This building clearly appears in Maxime Du Camp’s photo of ‘Gournah’ (1852: pl. 60) and survived as a small domed *sheikh*, with its neighbour Sheikh Hamad, until 2008. Du Camp was in Egypt from 1849 until 1851 and one of the very first travellers to photograph in Egypt. This photo of the hillside is the earliest found so far and also shows a large Coptic building on Sheikh abd el-Qurna where the later Sennufer Coffee Shop stood. There would have been an opportunity to excavate here at various times in the recent past, but the stratigraphy is now too disturbed.

Both the Coptic and the later Qurnawi buildings were made of earth. It is only in very recent years that the importance of earthen architecture in all its glorious variety has been formally acknowledged by the creation of the UNESCO World Heritage Earthen Architecture Programme. According to UNESCO, “Earthen architecture is one of the most original and powerful expressions of our human ability to create and build environments with nearby available resources. It includes a great variety of building types and groups, ranging from mosques, palaces and granaries to historic city centres, cultural landscapes, and archaeological sites” (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/21/>). The programme was officially launched in 2008, sadly too late to save or systematically record the earthen heritage of Qurna, from its houses and *zawyeh* to its most vulnerable ‘mud things’, structures made by women, chiefly for storage or safe-keeping of objects.

In Qurna such ‘mud things’ include *menama* (large circular open-topped sleeping platform with storage under), *sowaama* (conical roofed flour storage cupboard), *saffat* (square topped granary), and *bayata* (small bird house with lid and lockable side door), to name but a few. In their totality, they comprise the huge range of traditional storage and furniture structures made from the fermented mud, dung, and straw mixture that makes very strong, lightweight constructions. They were a feature of rural Upper Egypt, with parallels in other parts of Africa such as Mali. They were made by the women, and came in many shapes and sizes,

free-standing or attached to walls and tombs, used to store grain, household goods and food, to house chickens and pigeons, to sleep in or on – for any function that other cultures might make wooden furniture and storage items. They were often multi-purpose structures, depending on the need at the time. Those in advantageous positions were used as lookouts. Some in Qurna are known to be well over 150 years old; those in the *saff* tombs in Tarif are probably many centuries old. They were in courtyards, on roofs and in tombs. Due in part to today's greater availability of timber and plastic or metal containers, most are now no longer used. Herbert Winlock excavated similar structures in the Coptic Monastery of St. Epiphanius (the tomb of Dagi (TT 103) on Sheikh abd el-Qurna) and gave a detailed description of their production (WINLOCK 1926). They were an important, indeed crucial, part of the settled lives of the people on the hillside in Coptic and later times. Until the Qurnawi started to build outside the tombs from the mid 1800s onwards, they were the only visible signs of people living below ground.

Following the recent demolition of the standing structures of the hillside settlements the record of the 'mud things' is also in travellers' descriptions, drawings and photos (<http://www.qurna.org/article6.htm>). Some archaeological reports also show them. Apart from Van der Spek's thesis, they have seldom been recorded for their own sake, though often seen in the background of photos, but occasionally specific structures capture the viewer. Two examples illustrate a danger of drawing conclusions from a small sample of visual data. Borchardt's photo of an 'Open-air sleeping place for summer use in front of a house' shows a very large *menama* and other structures (BORCHARDT 1929, pl.189). The *menama* is highly decorated with a trellis-type feature at the top and mud lizards or crocodiles appliquéd around it. Mr. Dawson, a young Englishman employed by a bank in Upper Egypt between 1910 and 1914, came as a tourist to Qurna with his camera. He took a picture of a group of mud things and their welcoming owner (FIG. 7). Again this *menama* is in a very clean condition with a decorated top and has a square base. This one has the baby in – kept out of harm's way.

The usual *menama* hidden in a courtyard was seldom highly decorated although it might have handprints to bring good luck. Borchardt's *menama* stood just below the tomb of Nakht, and just to the left side of the path going to Der el-Bahari. Dawson's stood a little further along the same path, just opposite Yanni's house and on the right of the path. Both were on the main tourist route. Although the families probably also used them in a more practical way, it is likely that they were made especially eye-catching for the visiting tourist who would give a small gift in payment for taking a photo. This is a form of putting on a show for the tourist similar to 'Qurna Cinema' today when a craft seller will pretend to be working expertly on a piece that has already been finished by the absent craftsman. It is only by using the knowledge of the position of these two structures (that they are in a prime tourist-trap position) and the patterns of interaction between tourists and hosts that their fancy style can be fully understood. The large *menama* in a painting of 1842 by East India Company merchant William Prinsep, reproduced by LISE MANNICHE (1987: 3), may be another example of an especially impressive creation to attract visitors.

One group of mud things will serve as a case study for what has happened recently on the Theban Hills. The most spectacular and undamaged collection of mud things was in a back yard behind the Zawyet Khalil – close to the Yanni House; currently this *zawyeh* is the home of Qurna Discovery. The photo of part of this collection was taken by Dr Paulin-Grothe (FIG. 8). The oldest *menama* was said to have been made by a wife of Sheikh Awad, so it was probably over 150 years old, thus making it an ‘antiquity’ in its own right in the eyes of Egyptian antiquities laws, being over 100 years old. Other structures were very high and had been made by a particularly tall woman some 60-70 years ago. In addition to the external collection there were more inside the *bet el-hagar* or tomb house. Despite many calls from UNESCO over the years for a comprehensive management plan for the cultural heritage of Qurna, none had been done and so there was no survey to serve as a guide to what could and should be preserved. When demolitions were threatening everything on the hillside, Qurna Discovery received permission early in 2007 from the local SCA officials for these to be preserved as part of a group of properties. The Secretary General and ultimately the Minister of Culture also agreed to their preservation, recognising their contribution to showing the public a complete picture of Theban life and culture. However the lines of authority and relative powers on this World Heritage site have recently been such that they were demolished by bulldozers on the instructions of the Luxor authorities in April 2009 (FIG. 9), shortly after the demolition of the Yanni House - for which agreement had also been given for retention and restoration. The destruction of earthen heritage is happening all over the world due to the needs of ‘development’, the use of alternative building materials and the usurpation of traditional rural landscapes. Perhaps it is because mud cupboards and mud-brick buildings represent a simple, unsophisticated culture, often wrongly characterised as ‘backward’ and unseemly, that the powers that be do not recognise their worth. Their frailty and relative simplicity make them all too vulnerable. However, when they go, with them goes the history of their communities. Here in Qurna there were additional political and economic reasons that contributed to their loss. In the absence of the mud things themselves, it would be possible to make a collection of the existing images and information on these historic structures that are also disappearing fast all over Upper Egypt. It is possible to record those that still survive in the *saff* tombs in Tarif – which have been family homes for many hundreds of years - and any found in subsequent archaeological work in the hillside tombs. There is still work that could be done.

There is one major source of Qurna history yet to be tapped and it is not in far away libraries requiring foreign languages, and this is what exists in the memories and beliefs of the older generations of Qurnawi. Most of the sources and examples we have looked at have marginalized the Qurnawi in one way or another, but the oral history can only be gathered with their full involvement and cooperation, and ideally in a project led from within what was the hillside community. It is necessary to do this work in the very near future because the memories will fade and the beliefs change fast now that the Qurnawi have moved from the hillside. It is sad that no major study was done in the 1990s before a number of long settled Coptic families moved north, or in recent years before the major relocations of 2006. Many of the patterns

of belief recorded in John Kennedy's book (1978/2005) on the oral history of the Nubians apply also to Qurna. The Nubians moved far from their ancient homelands, and the Qurnawi have moved just a few kilometres north, but it is equally true that, "The shift was much more than simply a change of place; it also involved a break with the old styles of life" (KENNEDY 1978/2005: 2). Whereas with the Nubians the major force was the very special relationship between the river and the people, here in Qurna it was between the hillside and the people.

The Qurnawi communities have had a unique relationship with their close natural environment of the Theban Hills for well over 200 years – they have lived on and in the hillside – its holes, caves, rooms, tombs. In the centuries before settling permanently on the hillside, many of these same families lived in the shadow of the temples on the plain just below the hills and used the tombs for various purposes when necessary. This has created a community with what I believe is a unique set of beliefs about the supernatural powers of the natural world that surrounds them and the spirit world inhabited beside them. People's everyday movements between spaces, their relationship with the ground beneath them, the stones and materials that this ground is made of – these are all intricately wound up with beliefs in the spirits and powers of this landscape. As is common in many communities, this inter-relationship with the powers of the spiritual and unseen world is one that is far stronger in the older women, but is not confined to the elders, or wholly to females. Beliefs of this kind, held especially by older women, are common throughout Upper Egypt, intertwined with and underlying their Islamic or Coptic faiths, but I believe that the Qurnawis have been influenced so strongly by their geographic location as to have additional, and more intricate sets of beliefs and customs than other communities. Only through further research can we tell how far this goes.

As with the Nubians, the Nile itself and its waters were also forces in the stories and customs of the Qurnawi. There must have been strong connections between the Nile water and the Qurnawi, and occasional stories are recorded by the mainly male 19<sup>th</sup> century European writers; however nothing was systematically collected about local beliefs of any types. The end of the inundations due to the construction of the High Dam in the 1960s will have greatly changed the relationship of local women to the Nile itself, and to water brought to local wells from the Nile. In recent years it has been children and young men who have largely taken over the task of getting water from the water stand - with the large barrels and donkey driven cart. When women no longer went daily to collect water there was no longer that women's space and time for gossip, family communication and match making (FIG. 10). However, there will be women who still remember the stories and the customs of this earlier era that have fallen away. It would still be possible to collect these also.

The collection of the history of the latest people to inhabit the Theban hills and plain is (very belatedly) being increasingly recognised as important and Qurnawi studies are well underway. Treasures can still be dug from the archives. All those archaeologists, like Kent Weeks, and visitors who have taken photos of now vanished places, or who have, like Susan, painted and recorded crafts and ways of life now ended should gather and preserve them. There should be a central archive in Egypt, better still in Qurna - a Qurna Studies Centre. Young Qurnawi should

be able not only to learn about the glorious ancient past of their home area but also the part played in the palimpsest of this World Heritage Site by their more immediate ancestors. To quote Rhind again, “... it must be a very determined antiquarianism that, even on such a site as that of Thebes, can, under the circumstances, look so exclusively to the past as to close its eyes to the living interests of the present or the prospects of the future” (RHIND 1862: vii-viii).

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Fig. 1. Mansour el-Hashash, drawing by Joseph Bonomi, c 1830. Mrs Neville-Rolfe private collection.





Fig.2. Great granddaughter of Sheikh Awad meets great granddaughter of Joseph Bonomi and they swap stories. Sheikh abd el-Qurna, March 18<sup>th</sup> 2001. Caroline Simpson.



Fig.3. Fendia, mother of Ahmed abd er-Rasul and family. *The Light of Egypt* by Robert de Rustafjaell, 1909, plate xxix. Reproduced with permission of Griffith Institute, Sackler Library, University of Oxford.



Fig.4. *Sāqiya* on the plain opposite Qurnet Marei. Postcard c.1925. Caroline Simpson coll.



Fig.5. The wheel of the *Sāqiya* Bogdadi and the Qurna Discovery exhibition, 2004. Caroline Simpson.



Fig.6. Mud-brick *minbar* in the Muslim cemetery 1998. Caroline Simpson.



Fig.7. *Menama*, owner and infant, with the side wall of the Yanni House compound on the left. Sheikh abd el-Qurna, c1910. Dawson Collection, Cambridgeshire Collection, Cambridge Central Library.

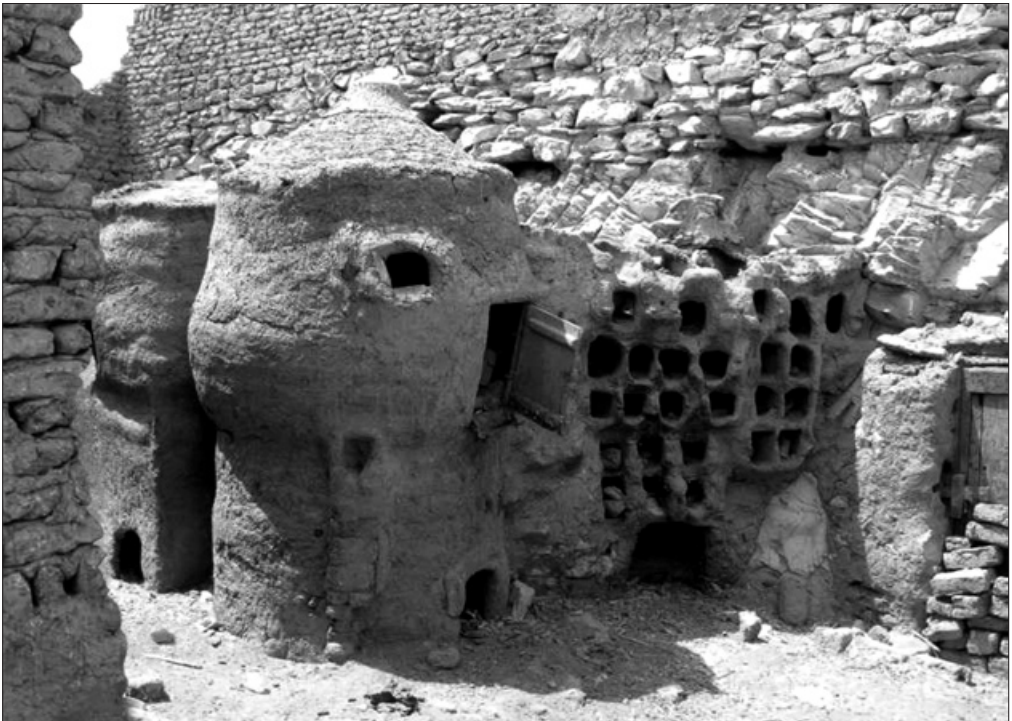


Fig.8. Various 'mud things' just to the south of the Zawyet Khalil, Sheikh abd el-Qurna, 2007. Caroline Simpson.



Fig.9. Structures seen in Plate 8 after destruction, April 2009.  
Caroline Simpson coll.



Fig. 10. Bir Taia, Ginena. Seti I temple is on the left, and Muslim cemetery on the right. Carter House in background built 1910. Photo c. 1915 found at a Collectors' Fair in the UK, 2004, anon. Caroline Simpson coll.