

Saving a City: A New Survey of Tell Timai Sets the Stage for the Study and Conservation of the Ruins of a Graeco-Roman Egyptian City

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Introduction

The ruins of the Graeco-Roman Egyptian city of Thmuis are found at Tell El Timai in the Nile Delta region of Egypt near the city of El-Mansourah. Thmuis flourished during Ptolemaic times and became the capital of the Mendesian nome. The city fell into decline and eventual abandonment by the end of the first millennium C.E. The site has received only sporadic archaeological attention over the last one-hundred-and-fifty years and is now in considerable danger from the expansion of neighboring modern towns.

In the summer of 2007 we conducted a pilot study of the site.



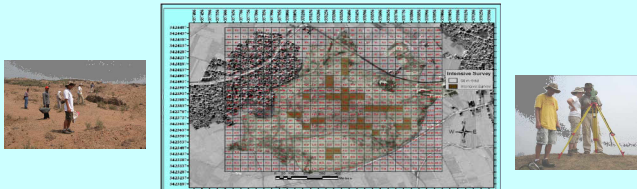
The Site

Tell Timai consists of a mound with a perimeter of approximately 7 km, sister to the pharonic Tell el Rub'a 500 m to north. To the northwest the modern village of Kafr el Amir Abdallah Ibn al Salam has encroached onto the mound. In the northeast the village of Timai el Amdid is encroaching even more aggressively.

Methods

Three primary methods were employed to collect the requisite data for analysis:

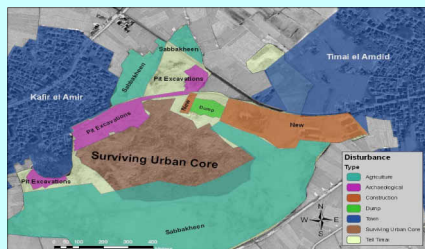
- (1) the use of GIS to analyze Satellite imagery,
- (2) the collection of geographical data with GPS and total station, and
- (3) the use of a pedestrian survey to evaluate the condition of specific portions of the Tell and to collect a sample of artifacts from the evaluated areas.



The Threat

The Tell has been despoiled over the centuries by sabbakheer who used the mud brick architecture for fertilizer, as well as by townspeople who took the mud brick and stone for use in building their homes. Large portions of the tell periphery, particularly visible in the leveled areas of the site to the south, north, and east have been under cultivation in the past. Townsfolk have dragged stone columns from the site to the edge of the tell near Kafr el Amir Abdallah. On the north and northwest periphery there have been widespread excavations that, without intervention, have cleared the way for further encroachment.

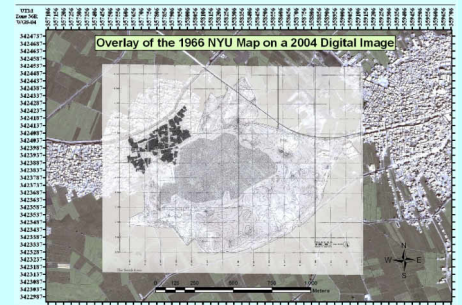
By far the most dramatic threat is the expansion of the neighboring towns. The peripheries of the tell on the east and west have already been subsumed in the neighboring towns, utterly destroying the archaeological remains. Already a garbage dump, a propane storage facility, the foundation for a new slaughterhouse, and three apartment buildings have sprung up in the south and east.



Objectives of the 2007 Study

- Georeferencing maps made during the 1966 NYU investigation,
- Assessing the basic urban organization of the site in preparation for a renewed program of excavation and conservation, and
- Evaluating the damage done to the site and the sources of threat facing the site

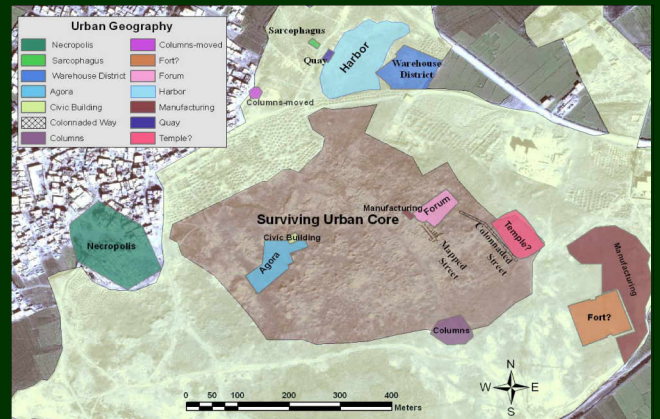
The rectified NYU map superimposed over digital imagery



The Urban Plan

Archaeological evidence collected during this survey, as well as that indicated by the NYU and Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) investigations, supports the following hypotheses about the urban geography of Graeco-Roman Thmuis:

- The northern sector contains the remains of a harbor, dock, and warehouse district.
- There are two loci consisting of forums/agoras and public architecture located in the central portion of the site, one in the east and one in the west.
- Based on the presence of large mounds of vitrified ceramic, the eastern portion of the site appears to have been involved in large scale manufacturing of an unknown type.
- Much of the urban architecture in the central portion of the Tell is in a state of preservation that would allow an accurate reconstruction of numerous square blocks of Graeco-Roman residential, public, and commercial structures. The condition of the standing architecture is rapidly deteriorating because of human and natural disturbances including looting, dumping, weathering, and animal and plant activity.



Conclusions

Our results indicate that while there has been extensive damage to the site, the urban core remains largely intact, including a maze of standing architecture. Our survey identified elite residential districts, forums, public buildings, a silted harbor, warehouse and manufacturing precincts, a possible Roman fort, and a possible temple. The excellent state of preservation of the central core of the ruin and the escalating pace of destruction suggest that immediate archaeological intervention will provide a wealth of information from an important political and manufacturing Egyptian Graeco-Roman center.

The progress of encroachment and destruction and long term conservation will require shifting values of the local population so that tourism and cultural patrimony supersede that of urban development.

Acknowledgements

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