

Al Masry al Youm article from 18 March 2013

Headline:

“Al Masry al Youm discovers the looting of the ancient city in al Minya governorate in broad daylight. Gangs digging for antiquities in el Sheikh Abada and only one guard in charge of the security.”

Photo captions:

Top left: “The buildings extend to the columns of the ancient city.”

Lower left: “Planting the land to cover the looting of the antiquities.”

Lower right: “Building the new cemeteries as a new way to hide the digging works.”

Article text: [With additional comments and corrections in brackets.]

“Once you enter el Sheikh Abada to the south of Mellawi in Minya province - which holds remains of three ancient civilizations, the pharaonic, Roman, and Islamic civilizations - the evidence of destroyed ancient monuments is all around you. [Islamic pottery or “remains of Islamic civilization” is mentioned throughout the article as predominating on the site; however, there is a paucity of Islamic period material around the site compared to the vast quantity of Christian material which is hardly mentioned in the article at all.] And holes dug by the armies of gangs of the village are everywhere. Or you may see scattered bits indicating they maybe hit a coffin of linen, or Roman coins, or small statues, or small scarabs.

“Antinoupolis or el Sheikh Abada village is on the east bank of the Nile south of Mellawi in Minya province. The name comes from the name of one of the follows of Mohammed, Abada Ibn el Samet, under whose guidance the people of this area came to Islam.

“The great follower entered the ancient city and he passed between the Roman buildings and buried antiquities and monasteries which were built in 130 CE over an area of 7 square kilometers over an ancient pharaonic city about which its walls stand as a witness until today. [Other than the Ramses II temple, there is no evidence of the presence of a pharaonic-period city.]

“The first thing that meets you when you enter the old city is the well of el Sahahba, as the Moslems call it, or the well of Ali el Sahaba as the Christians call it. And the history of this well goes back to the Holy Family, not only did Mary pass by this well, but also Mary the Copt [one of the wives of Mohammed] passed by this well, too. She was one of the people who lived in this city and also Syrene, the wife of the follower named Hassan Ibn Sabet also lived here. Mary the Copt and Syrene were sent to Mohammed as a gift. Instead of the building of Mary the Copt, they built the mosque of Abada. And in the city there is a house of Theodora, one of the Coptic monuments which is not being looted by the gangs.

“Once you turn from the well you find yourself in front of the first of the looting areas where there is the hippodrome - or the horse racetrack - which is about the same size as the Circus Maximus, the famous hippodrome in Rome. The racetrack takes the shape of a horseshoe, but the digging works have destroyed most of its remaining fabric so that you can no longer make out its shape. The digging works around all the city are not the only destruction, but the new cemeteries of 70 villages around are located here. The new cemeteries are here because the people of the other villages failed to extend their own cemeteries, but put their new cemeteries here which are obliged to be built over the antiquities. The people in charge of the MSA in Mellawi have said this to us, but they asked us not to use their names. They said that when you build a new cemetery you cannot move the graves to another place, especially in a village of Upper Egypt.

“The deep digging is all around and the rest of the ancient pottery which dates back to the Roman and Islamic era are spread over the entire site. You can see armed people digging, and they disappear suddenly when they see strangers around. And there is only one guard with an old gun. The number of the guards were thirty-one, and now there is only one waiting for his retirement next September. Without providing a new trained guard.

“On the top of the Deir el Hawa site [a monastery at the north end of Antinopolis] al Masry al Youm saw some people digging in broad daylight, and once they saw us come, they disappeared as if the mountain swallowed them. And they left a deep hole after some of the archaeologists found pharaonic gold and colored glass and some papyrus and ancient coins which give them the hope to find something valuable. [No gold, pharaonic or otherwise, has ever been found by archaeologists at Deir el Hawa.] The guard shot his gun in the air trying to make them run away until the police can come and see. Once they leave, the people come back again and continue digging.

“In the site of Deir el Hawa and Deir el Sombat [another monastery farther to the north] some of the monks’ rooms can be seen, but the digging works under the walls of these rooms make them collapse. And after the failure of the illegal digging which causes the collapse of the monuments, the second stage comes which is the plowing over and planting of alfalfa or clover for the feeding of livestock after getting rid of all the pottery, by burning it with the rubbish of the city. Beside the garbage dump there is a temple of Ramses II which is preserved with its columns, only a few of them were destroyed without anyone trying to restore it again. Behind the Ramses II temple a person has built his house which is against the law which says no one may build within three kilometers of a pharaonic temple.

“Around the temple of Ramses II the women of the village take the dung of the cows and water buffalo to dry to make fuel for fires to use in baking. And after all these violations, Nagua Mohammed Ali, the manager of ancient sites in Mellawi, she cares only for not giving us any information, and she ordered her employees not to give us any information or to help us in any

way. She asked the photographer of Al Masry al Youm to destroy the pictures he had taken of the damage of the site.

“An Egyptologist who completed her PhD at Berlin University, Monica Hanna considered what happened in Mellawi, “a complete crime for Egyptian history.” She has been supplied with notes of the damage by the Italian Mission, the Istituto Papirologico [“G. Vitelli” of the University of Florence], which works at the site. The reports of the Mission contain information regarding the great violations of the people digging or building or planting around the site.

“Hanna adds, “What happened in el Sheikh Abada is a tragedy by all means because people there have no source of income and most of them work in digging for antiquities. And the land allocated for building is very limited, and it stands as a barrier for normal increase of building for the people of the village. Without the interference of the state to provide an alternative, they were obliged to go to the ancient city which has no guard for their expansions. We ask for increasing the guards and arming them with guns so they can stand against armed thieves of the village.”