

Suzanne Lax-Bojtos

Deir el Medina – an Artists' Community in Ancient Egypt

In May Suzanne Lax-Bojtos visited us in Witham with a thorough and copiously illustrated survey of Deir el Medina.



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The settlement is unusual in a number of ways: it was built in the middle of the desert with the simple purpose of housing the people creating the tombs in the Valley of the Kings; it had to be supplied by the Theban administration; it provides material and textual evidence of the religious and domestic lives of the inhabitants as well as their funerary practices.

The village was established during the time of Thutmose I and continued to be used for 400 years until its abandonment in c.1050 BCE. Most of the texts and tombs come from the Ramesside period. Approximately 400 inhabitants would have lived in the 120 houses. Some of the houses were enclosed by a wall with a street running down the middle of the settlement. The closely packed houses are long and thin with usually 4 rooms arranged one behind the other. There are cellars and it is possible that the roof was also used for sleeping in hot weather. The walls would have been plastered and white washed and there is evidence of decoration. Furniture found in the tomb of Kha and Merit, now in the Museo Egizio in Turin, provides evidence of the furnishing of these houses



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Many objects and personal items have also been found including tools, senet games, baskets, wigs and wig boxes, a make-up box, offering tables, mirrors and razors.

Evidence of the religious practices in the village comes from the small niches in the houses which could contain statues and items placed in tombs as well as the chapels and temple close to the village. Amenhotep I and his mother, Amose Nefertari were worshipped as gods while a range of other national and local gods were revered. The asiatic triad of Reshep, Quadesh and Min also make an appearance. There is evidence of the use of oracles.

The workers were given a 'salary' for their work consisting of food. Supplied of grain, fish, fruit, vegetables, honey, beer and wine were provided along with meat for special occasions. Five and a half sacks of grain were given to each worker per month which could be either emmer, wheat or barley. This would have been enough to feed a family of 10.

There is evidence of higher levels of literacy among the inhabitants than was usual with a big collection of papyri and ostraca. They were 'middle class' and highly skilled. There are government records, love poems, family problems and legal disputes, the latter often being about donkeys. Many of these documents were found in the Great Pit, a large excavation close to the temple which was intended to be a well. When no water was found it became a rubbish dump. There is no evidence of a school at the village but fathers would have taught their children

One man who appears frequently in the documents is Paneb, a foreman and criminal. We learn that he stole from the royal tombs, threw stones at people, made the workers under his direction work on his own projects and slept with other men's wives. Another woman clearly also had family problems. Naunakhte, a mother to eight children, thought four of them were good and four of them were bad so she disinherited the bad ones.

The purpose of the village was to house the skilled workers preparing the tombs in the valley of the kings. They cut into the rock to create the tombs, prepared the walls, whitewashed them and then applied the decoration. They were able to create a large range of art. Between 30 to 130 men worked on each tomb, depending on the age of the pharaoh. The working week was eight days long with a two day rest. The path from the village to the valley still snakes its way over the hill between them. It would have been a long journey to complete each day so the workers stayed in the valley or returned to a way station along the path where food would be brought to them. Another theory about the way station is that the men were carrying heavy tools which would have made the whole journey back the village arduous. Precautions were taken to make sure they did not take any of the tools: the tools were weighed in and out at the beginning and end of each day's work.

The workers were able to use their skills to create their own tombs on the slopes around the village. The tombs were rock cut and some had a pyramidal superstructure. The painted scenes inside the tombs show the activities of everyday life as well as scaled down versions of the religious scenes in the king's tombs in the next valley.

Alison Woollard