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## A BUILDING OF AMENOPHIS III AT KÔM EL-‘ABD

By BARRY J. KEMP

THE site of Kôm el-‘Abd lies on the west bank of the Nile, about 3.5 km to the south-west of Amenophis III’s palace complex at Malkata, and thus about 2 km beyond the south-westerly mounds of the Birket Habu. It stands between the modern villages of Hager el-Dabiya and Hager el-Meris (which appear on the older survey maps as Naga Abu Anz and Naga Omar Abu Khiragi). Its principal feature of interest is the isolated mud-brick building of Amenophis III excavated in 1936–7 by an expedition of the Egypt Exploration Society directed by O. H. Myers. A brief report on the work, which contains the essential information, appeared in *JEA* 23 (1937), 118, but otherwise it has remained unpublished, although detailed records were made at the time. The plans, made by Ralph Lavers, drawings of objects, photographs, and an outline text are preserved at the Egypt Exploration Society offices in London. During the survey of the Malkata area carried out in 1969 by the University Museum of Pennsylvania I located the site again and made a brief visit. Further visits were undertaken by various members of the staff of the University Museum expedition to Malkata in 1973 under my supervision, including one by the expedition’s surveyor, G. Dennis Sykes, who fixed the position of Kôm el-‘Abd in relation to the mounds of the Birket Habu. To these people, to Professor H. W. Fairman who first directed my attention to Myers’s work in the area, to the Committee of the Egypt Exploration Society who generously granted permission to study Myers’s records and to reproduce Lavers’s plan and section, and to Dr. David O’Connor, director of the Malkata project, I wish to express my indebtedness. The sketch map of fig. 1 I have built up myself from various sources, including the aerial photographs published in *The Bucheum*, III, pl. ix; the photographs published here were taken by myself and thus show the present state of the site.

The site is about 200 m from the present edge of the cultivation, and stands on the crest of a broad plateau of gravelly desert sloping slightly down towards the cultivation, broken by a shallow wadi a short distance to the north-east (pl. XI, 1). The desert cliffs lie a long way back, and the site has a sense of isolation which it probably possessed when first built. A careful examination of the surrounding desert failed to show any traces that might suggest that the Eighteenth-Dynasty buildings had spread any further than is shown on Lavers’s plan. An area of unexcavated settlement remains extends around the south-east side, but as the appendix suggests, the indications are that this belongs to a period much later, when the character of the site was very different. On the north-west side, beyond the row of tree pits, Myers seems to have tested the ground but without revealing any traces of antiquity at all. Around the west corner the desert surface seems to have been cleared of coarser stones, but this may be quite recent.

The Eighteenth-Dynasty building consists of two parts (fig. 2):

1. **The platform.** The rectangular platform measures 45 by 40 m, with a height to the top of the brick paving of 3.75 m. The central portion of the north-west wall is thickened to create a projection about 0.75 m wide (pl. XII, 1). The hollow rectangle of the thick surrounding wall is subdivided by internal partition walls, to add stability. The group on the north-east side, however, also gives the impression of having been constructed as usable rooms, (pl. XII, 2), and near the north corner an entrance had temporarily been left in the surrounding wall, though subsequently sealed up. Lavers suggested that they may have belonged to an earlier plan, later abandoned, for accommodation or storage; alternatively, the builders themselves may have arranged the walls like this for their own convenience. The rooms were never plastered, and whatever their purpose had been, when the platform was finished no hint can have remained of their existence. All of the internal spaces were filled with the local sand and gravel, which also contained predynastic sherds and flints, and a mud-brick pavement was laid over the whole surface. Myers had the filling removed from the rooms in the east corner, but otherwise left it in place.

One form of attack to which the platform was subsequently exposed was removal of the brickwork. This extended to the upper course of the retaining wall and of the internal walls, so that the pavement was broken into a series of islands isolated partly by trenches where brick robbing had been carried out. Nevertheless, it is important to note two places where Lavers clearly marks this paving running across the main internal partition walls, and an area of paving covering much of one of the rooms on the north-east side.

On the south-west side, the platform was reached by a broad ramp which evidently terminated in a square landing. At the conclusion of the excavation Myers restored the brickwork at the bottom of the ramp, and this is still visible (pl. XI, 2). A row of ten tree pits was located 11 m from the north-west face of the platform.

2. **The houses.** These, when excavated, were already destroyed down to the last few courses, or even to the foundation level. They filled a compound of similar dimensions to those of the platform itself, and comprised seven units. Four of them form a single block with central corridor and have identical plans: a square living-room with two smaller chambers opening off from one side, an entrance chamber and an intermediate chamber connecting it to the living-room. The column bases are evidently restored by Lavers. The same elements occur in the two separate houses, slightly rearranged so that the intermediate chamber becomes a third chamber leading from the living-room. Houses very similar in plan and arrangement were found at Malkata itself, in a block running parallel to the North Palace.<sup>1</sup> The seventh house is larger, and closer to the standard el-Amarna villa, though in less constricted sites the three rooms at the south-east end would normally have been arranged along the north-east side. The whole group bears a general resemblance to the group of houses in area VI at Maru-Aten<sup>2</sup> and, like them, was presumably caretaker accommodation.

<sup>1</sup> H. G. Evelyn-White, *BMMA* 10, no. 12 (Dec. 1915), 254-5, fig. 3.

<sup>2</sup> T. E. Peet and C. L. Woolley, *The City of Akhenaten*, 1, 114; pl. 29.

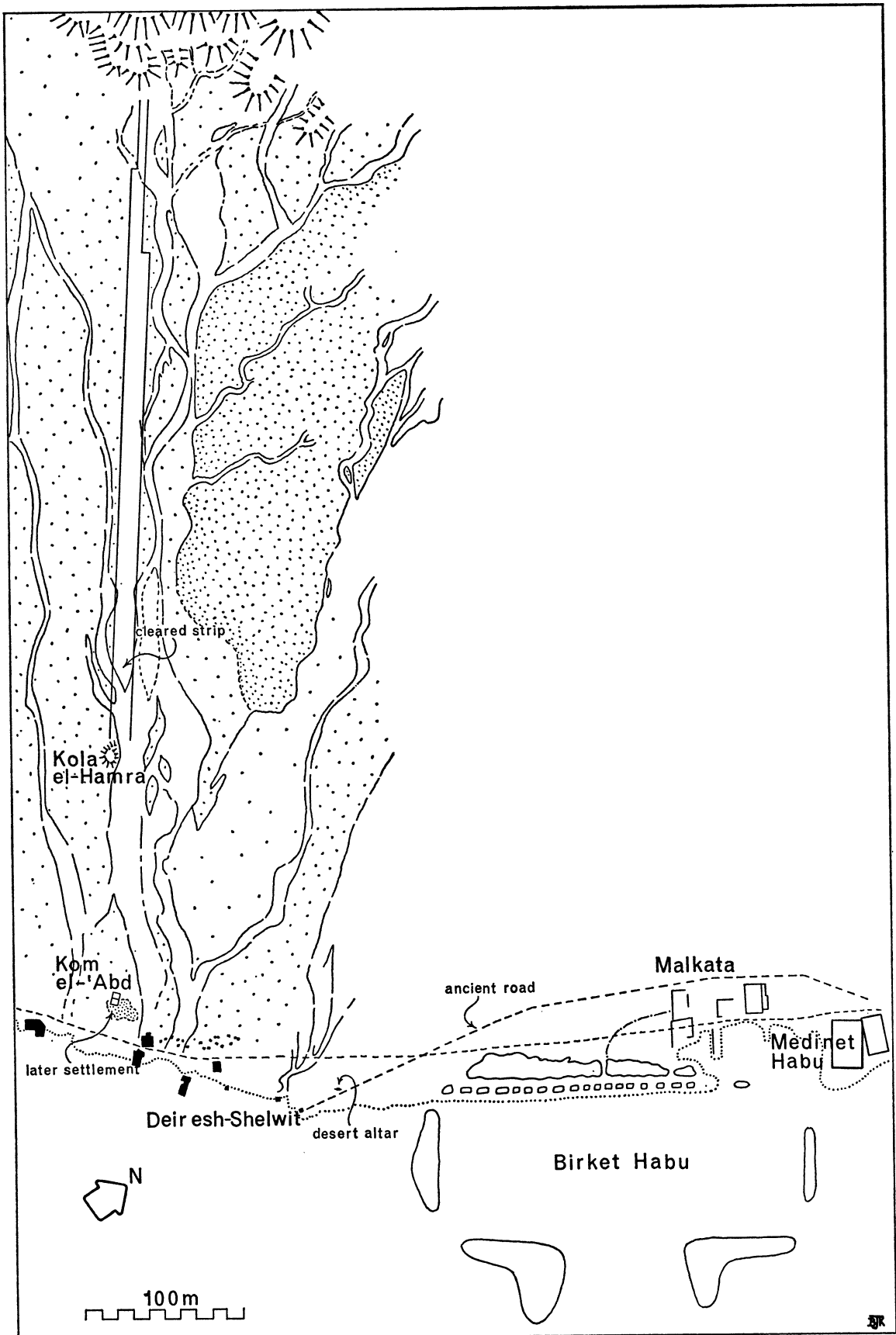


FIG. 1. Sketch map showing the relationship of Kôm el-'Abd to Malkata and to the strip of cleared desert behind Kola el-Hamra.

# KŌM EL 'ÁBD

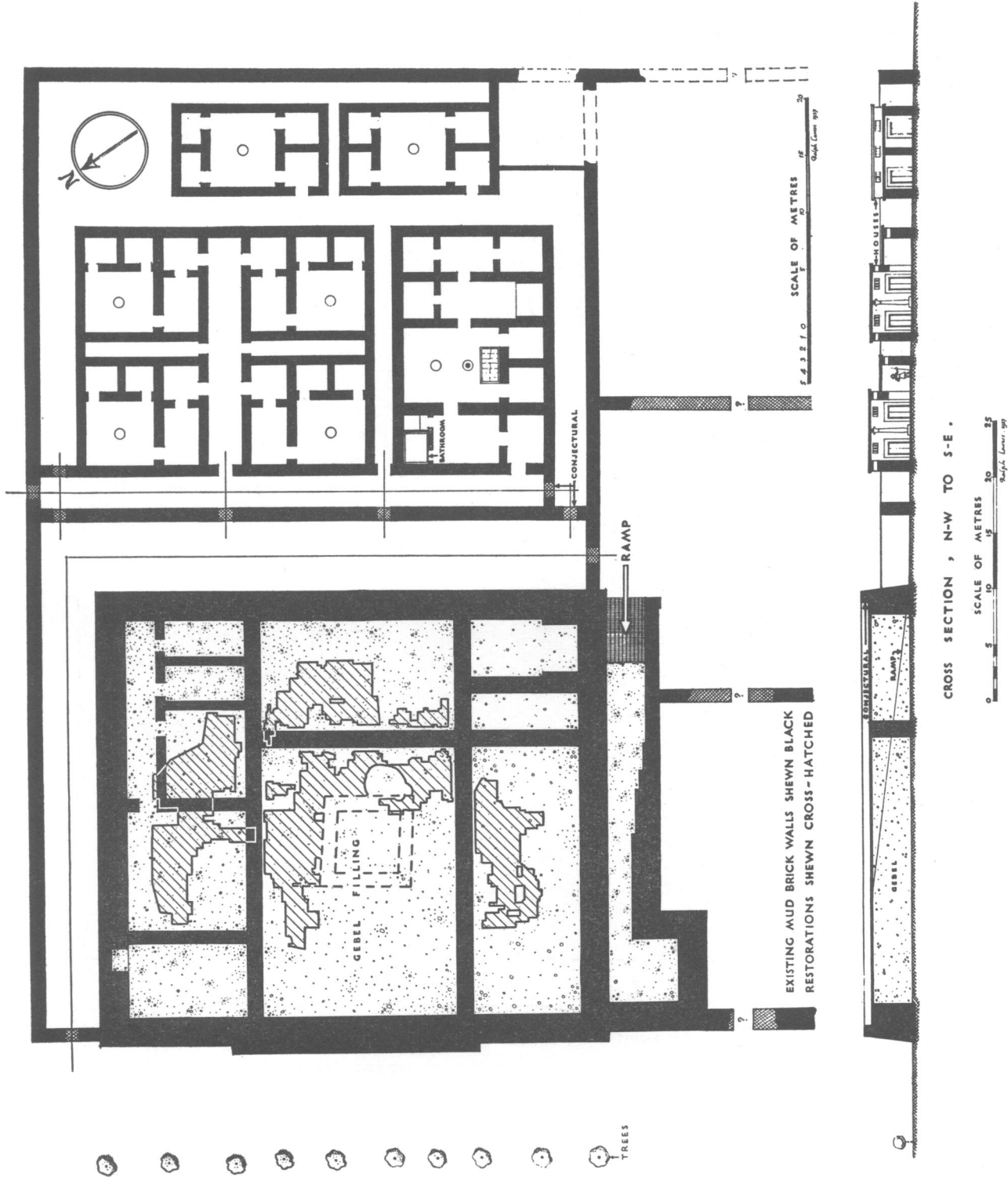


FIG. 2. Ralph Lavers' plan and section of Kōm el-'Ábd. The hatched portions on the platform represent areas of mud brick paving, and have been added from a separate plan which Lavers made of the later remains.

The excavations produced Eighteenth-Dynasty pottery, including blue-painted sherds (and Mycenaean ones), but more specific for dating the building were bricks stamped with the name of Amenophis III. Myers formed the opinion that the original occupation had been very slight: the complex had either been used for a very short period or had never been used at all for its original purpose. This thought should be compared with the impression of incompleteness which the Birket Habu can create.<sup>3</sup>

In his surviving manuscript, which for Kôm el-‘Abd is quite brief, Myers allots little space to considering the purpose of the building, merely quoting Lavers’s comparison with the desert altars at el-Amarna. This comparison, however, is not a very appropriate one, particularly since a structure much closer to the desert altars can be found near to Malkata, not far from the western corner of the Birket Habu (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> Central to the interpretation of its purpose is the question: what, if anything, stood on top of the platform? The question is complicated by the fact that in later centuries a little village grew up around the platform, which itself had graves dug into it. In the middle of the platform and resting partly on the original pavement were the remains of a square brick room dubbed ‘The Pentice’ by Myers. Its outline is marked as a broken line on fig. 2. Its solidity and construction suggested contemporaneity with the platform, yet it was neither truly central nor in proper alignment with the main structure. Furthermore, it can be seen that its walls in no way correspond to the internal strengthening walls of the platform. Myers’s final suggestion was that it may have been a guard post for times when the structure was not in use; at all events, it should evidently be discounted in considering the original appearance and purpose of the platform.

No other walls which could conceivably belong to the original construction were found on the platform, despite the preservation of significant stretches of brick pavement. As noted above, robbery of brickwork has affected the upper courses of the internal walls, but even so at three points the pavement crosses them. Furthermore, had it been intended to erect rooms and columns on the platform, one can be reasonably sure that more internal walls would have been included so that the weight of the superstructure could be transmitted directly to the ground and not indirectly via the gravel fill. The largest of the desert altars at el-Amarna is instructive here.<sup>5</sup> The platform in this case contained a maze of internal walls evidently to act as secure foundations for a columned pavilion built on top. In the North Palace at Malkata the casemate foundations were not as elaborate as this in that column bases at least seem not to have

<sup>3</sup> B. Kemp and D. O’Connor, ‘An Ancient Nile Harbour. University Museum Excavations at the “Birket Habu”’, *Int. J. Nautical Archaeol.* 3 (1974), 101–36, esp. 133.

<sup>4</sup> This was surveyed by the University Museum expedition in 1969 and 1973; subsequently it became part of the Waseda University Expedition concession, and was excavated by them in the following year, see J. Leclant, *Orientalia* 44 (1975), 221–2. The significance of their discovery of the painted stairway, fortuitously preserved, can easily be over-estimated. The desert altars at el-Amarna were probably quite handsome structures originally, but destruction has removed all their decoration. The decorative theme of bows and prisoners was used as pavement decoration in one of the less formal parts of the Great Palace at el-Amarna, see Petrie, *Tell el Amarna*, pl. 2. Hayes, *JNES* 10 (1951), 36 and n. 12, referred to the structure near Deir esh-Shelwit as ‘a small courtyard surrounding the base of a solar obelisk’.

<sup>5</sup> H. Frankfort and J. D. S. Pendlebury, *The City of Akhenaten*, II, 101–2, pls. 26, 27.

had separate foundations, but even so the areas of the individual compartments were in general smaller than the main platform compartment at Kôm el-ʿAbd, despite being less than 2 m high (as against 3.75 m at Kôm el-ʿAbd). One can form the impression that within the plan of the platform and its ramp the elements of an el-Amarna villa are present, with the entrance hall at the top of the ramp, the main hall where the central compartment of the platform is, even a bed alcove in the south corner. Yet the evidence of the brick pavement seems definitely to exclude any major brick construction on the top. For the same reasons a heavy central altar, such as one would expect if the platform had served as a solar shrine, or 'sunshade', is equally unlikely. This is not the end of the matter of what may have stood on the top, but before considering other possibilities the question of its over-all purpose must be pursued a little further.

One of the difficulties in trying to find explanations for buildings made for kings is that, between them, religion and strict utility do not exhaust the possibilities. Kings are in a position to have their whims and fantasies realized, and in the history of royal architecture, oriental as well as, perhaps even more than, occidental, this is a strong theme, though often blended with symbolism. A clue for Kôm el-ʿAbd may exist in its location opposite the end of a long straight stretch of swept desert, which is marked on fig. 1. This is briefly described in *The Bucheum*, I, 26, and, with a little more detail, in Myers's manuscript. An oblique aerial photograph of most of it appears on pl. X of *The Bucheum*, III. It commenced about 2.0 km from the desert edge and ran in a straight line to the base of the hills about 4.1 km further away. It seems to have been about 120 m wide, and to have been made simply by removing all of the larger stones, a method of making desert roads known elsewhere in ancient Egypt, including the desert behind el-Amarna.<sup>6</sup> At the further, north-western, end it narrows down twice, stepping in once from the north-east and then again from the south-west, as can be just seen with the aid of magnification in *The Bucheum* aerial photographs. Myers queried if this was perhaps a sign that it had been left unfinished, though the edges of this stepping do seem to have been very regular. However, a more definite indication that it was never finished was found in the form of small piles of pebbles remaining on the surface which gave the impression of having been collected but not yet removed. At its nearer end it terminated at a prominent hill called Kola el-Hamra. The top of this had been occupied by something like a Coptic hermitage, but in the course of examining the top, which included the excavation of the hermitage itself, forty-one New Kingdom sherds were collected by Myers's expedition. The sides of these sherds were worn from use as 'spades' or 'scrapers'. Whatever else is implied by this, Kôm el-ʿAbd is too far away from Kola el-Hamra for sherds to have been transported in a casual way, and they may thus have been connected with the road. No other direct evidence for date or use was found, and in the manuscript Myers notes that by 1938 *sebbakhîn* had destroyed all but the upper reach.

In *The Bucheum* Myers repeats a suggestion by Sir Robert Mond that the road may have led to an important tomb, and this appears also in the manuscript. A strong

<sup>6</sup> Petrie, *Tell el Amarna*, 4-5, pl. 35; P. Timme, *Tell el-Amarna vor der deutschen Ausgrabung im Jahre 1911*, 33-5, Blatt 4, 6.

argument against this, and against any suggestion that it was intended to facilitate travel to anywhere at all from the Nile valley is that the nearer end of its course was blocked by the hill of Kola el-Hamra. The impression so created that it was complete in itself led to Myers's own view that it was a 'chariot race-course, the knoll in the Low Desert representing the grand stand'.<sup>7</sup> One might note that we have no evidence that the Egyptians ever raced chariots, though this is perhaps too natural a thing to do for them to have avoided it, but certainly the display of individual chariotry skill by the king is well known, particularly from the larger of the sphinx stelae of Amenophis II,<sup>8</sup> and the track behind Kôm el-‘Abd would seem eminently suitable for this sort of activity. From this association arises an explanation for Kôm el-‘Abd itself: that it served as a rest-house.

The quasi-military trappings which one might expect to be associated with chariotry displays suggests one form of structure which might have been set on the brick platform. Tents and awnings made of light timber frames to be covered with linen had been fabricated as far back as the Old Kingdom, a most instructive example being the awning frame on the funerary boat of Khufu.<sup>9</sup> Deckhouses apparently of wooden frames covered with decorated tent-cloths were also standard on New-Kingdom boats,<sup>10</sup> but now there is a more relevant source of information in the representations of military tents. Their outlines with characteristic pitched or curved roofs occur in the Battle of Qadesh reliefs.<sup>11</sup> The Abu Simbel version seems to depict painted decoration of kneeling prisoners on a side wall, and a cartouche flanked with falcons on the end wall. A similar tent outline with gently curving roof appears in the Punt reliefs of Ḥatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, where it is actually labelled 'the tent (*imꜣw*) of the royal envoy'.<sup>12</sup> Some details of construction can probably be gleaned from pictures of two similarly shaped structures on two of the blocks associated with the Memphite tomb of Ḥoremḥeb.<sup>13</sup> In particular, they seem to show poles with decorated tops and a door evidently in a wooden frame. This might imply wooden frame walls as well, with joinery perhaps along the lines of the canopy frame from the tomb of Tut'ankhamūn.<sup>14</sup> Seven tent poles 'worked with silver of the tent (*imꜣw*)' of the prince of Qadesh were amongst the booty captured at

<sup>7</sup> Sir R. Mond and O. H. Myers, *The Bucheum*, I, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Discussed in W. Decker, *Die physische Leistung Pharaos: Untersuchungen zu Heldentum, Jagd und Leibesübungen der ägyptischen Könige* (Köln, 1971), 122-35.

<sup>9</sup> B. Landström, *Ships of the Pharaohs* (London, 1970), 26-34.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 98-110, 134-6.

<sup>11</sup> W. Wreszinski, *Atlas zur altaegyptischen Kulturgeschichte*, II, 81/2; 92a = 93/4; 169/70 = 177.

<sup>12</sup> E. Naville, *The Temple of Deir el Bahari*, III, pl. 69.

<sup>13</sup> J. Capart, *JEA* 7 (1921), pl. 6, fig. 1, p. 33; Wreszinski, *Atlas*, I, 386. B; R. Hari, *Horemheb et la reine Moutnedjemet*, 73-6, figs. 17, 19. A. Badawy, *A History of Egyptian Architecture* (III), *The Empire* (the New Kingdom) (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968), 133, identifies the structures as sheds; cf. A. Badawy, *Le Dessin architectural chez les anciens égyptiens* (Cairo, 1948), 128; also H. Schäfer (ed. J. Baines), *Principles of Egyptian Art* (Oxford, 1974), 127.

<sup>14</sup> *PM* I, 2nd edn., part 2, 571, no. 208; H. Carter, *The Tomb of Tut-Ankh-Amen*, II, pls. 55, 56. There would also have been a general resemblance to the larger military tents of the Roman army which were made of leather and, when for officers and commanders, were carried on a box frame of wooden poles and slats giving the same rectangular plan with pitched roof as Egyptian tents seem to have had. A useful discussion, based partly on the representations on Trajan's Column, is J. McIntyre and I. A. Richmond, 'Tents of the Roman Army and Leather from Birdoswald', *Trans. Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and*



Megiddo by Tuthmosis III.<sup>15</sup> Although royal tents are usually associated with military campaigns, in one significant instance the king uses one for a visit within his own country. The reference occurs in the second set of boundary stelae at el-Amarna:<sup>16</sup> 'On this day, One was in Akhetaten in the tent of matting (*imꜣw n psst*)<sup>17</sup> which had been made for His Majesty (l.p.h.) in Akhetaten, the name of which was "The Aten is Content".' Evidently in this case matting was substituted for linen, and again there is a parallel with deckhouses on ships.<sup>18</sup>

In the reconstruction of fig. 3 I have, with some liberty, sketched in some tents, although there is no clear evidence as to how large or extravagant they might have been. Those in fig. 3 probably err on the side of modesty. The act of reconstructing ancient buildings obliges one to find solutions to various uncertainties which a plan can discreetly avoid. Thus I also assumed that the walls on the south-west side did not extend very much further, and formed a series of courtyards; also that, as Lavers evidently concluded, no wall would have been as high as the platform so that the view from the top would not be obstructed. How the main gateways were completed has to remain very conjectural for lack of clear comparative evidence. The el-Amarna solution for combining firm gateposts with formality in the shape of the broken-lintel door frame may not have been in use in earlier domestic architecture. The pylon-like structure at the main entrance I still find somewhat unconvincing, but could think of nothing better. For each of the houses Lavers, in his section (fig. 2), provided a raised roof over the living-room. This seems reasonable in the case of the large house, but less so in the others since two sides of each living-room were external walls and thus lighting should have offered no problem. Other comparable house groups seem to provide a greater degree of privacy than the multiple means of access suggested by Lavers would offer; I thus disregarded several of his conjectural entrances. However, so that visiting parties entering from the valley side could receive services immediately upon arrival, direct access from the housing compound to the south-east courtyard seems to be required, and the small enclosure in the south corner of this compound would serve as an isolating intermediate zone between houses and the formal space of the courtyard.

The choice of site at Kôm el-ʿAbd may have been determined in the first instance by the fact that the desert behind may have been the nearest to Malkata which was relatively flat over a sufficient distance. Immediately to the north-east the ground rises to a low dissected plateau, then follows a wadi system, and finally the hills rapidly

*Archaeological Soc.* N.S. 34 (1934), 62-90. They also apparently had guy-lines, but these are omitted from the Trajan's Column carvings, a point that might be considered in interpreting the Egyptian evidence. If framed tents ever were pitched on the Kôm el-ʿAbd platform some form of anchoring would almost certainly have been necessary.

<sup>15</sup> *Urk.* IV, 664, 7; cf. 659, 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> N. de G. Davies, *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna*, v, pl. 26, line 5, p. 32; M. Sandman, *Texts from the Time of Akhenaten*, 122.

<sup>17</sup> *Wb.* I, 555 (1); Faulkner, *Dict.*, 95; Helck, *Materialien*, (407), (434, 435). H. Goedicke, *The Report of Wenamun*, 49, suggests 'tavern' for the meaning of *imw* in this text. Possibly the context does demand an alternative to 'tent', but the *Urk.* IV, 60, 17 reference quoted in support has all the appearance of a figure of speech. The writer, Anena, would hardly have lived in 'lowly accommodation' (or if he did, have admitted it in this particular context).

<sup>18</sup> Landström, op. cit. 134-7.

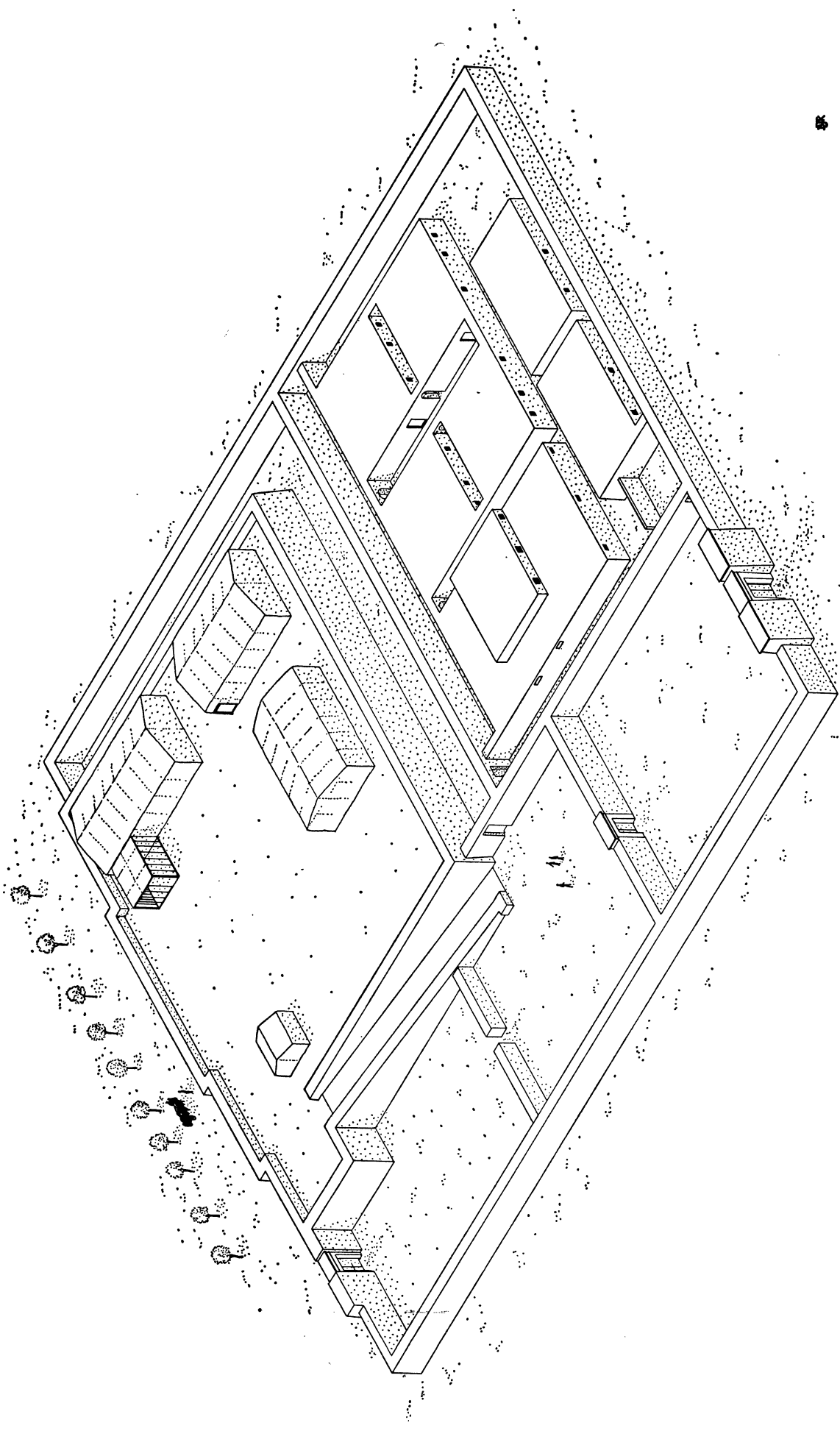


Fig. 3. Kom el-Abd: isometric reconstruction.

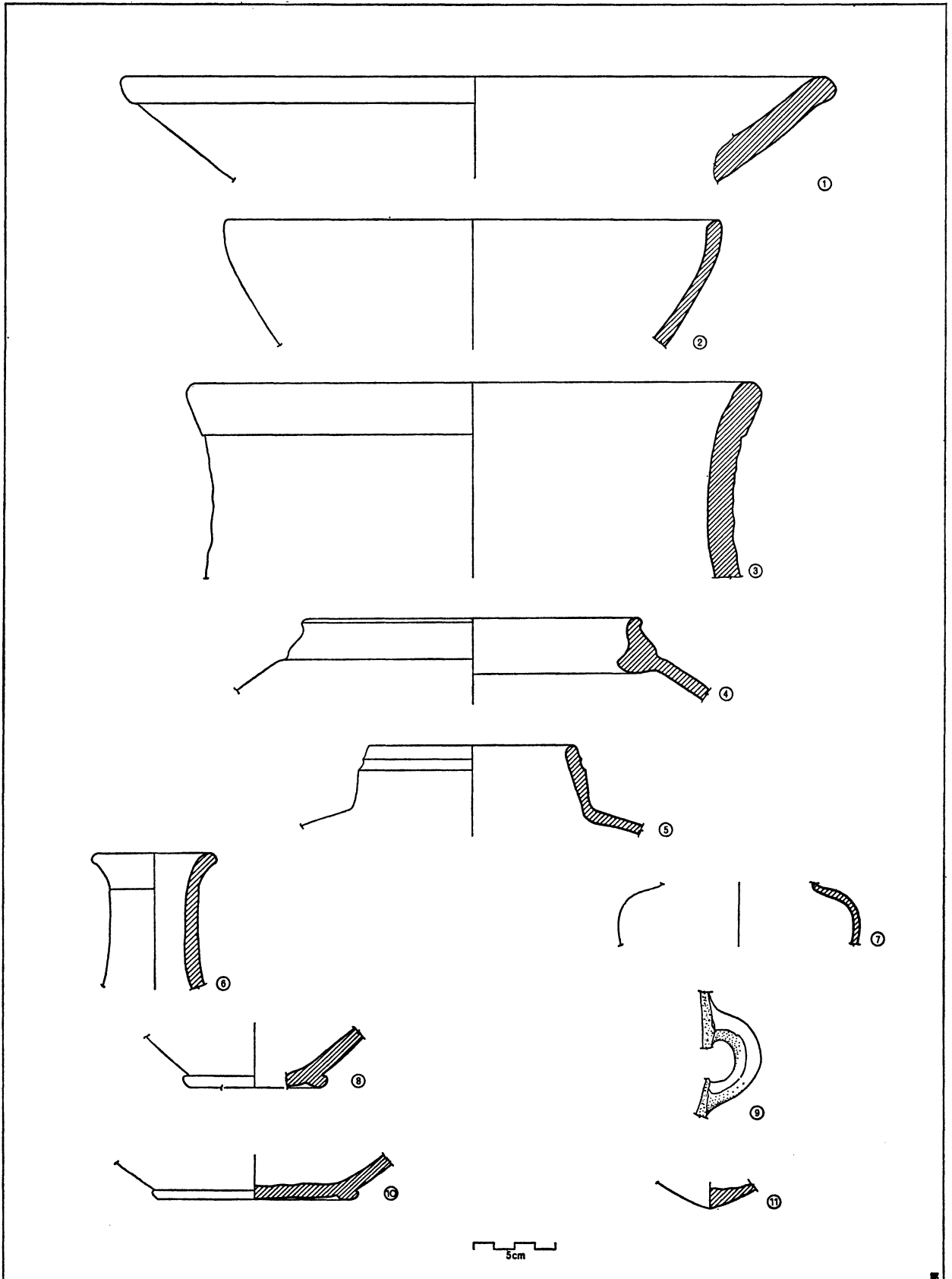


FIG. 4. Kôm el-'Abd: later settlement pottery.

approach the desert edge. The seclusion of the site may also have been in its favour, affording a temporary escape from palace life and affairs. Between Malkata and Kôm el-'Abd the desert surface is fairly rough in places and crossed by several shallowly-incised wadis, which would probably make difficulties for chariots. The work of the Metropolitan Museum of Art at Malkata drew attention to an ancient roadway, partly constructed as a causeway, most carefully laid out behind Malkata.<sup>19</sup> It was assumed that this belonged to Amenophis III's constructions. However, my own examination of this curious feature, which I carried out in 1969, during the University Museum of Pennsylvania survey of the area, convinced me that it is later than the Malkata complex, was indeed probably made when it had been abandoned, and represents a military road or something similar which, because of the obstruction caused by the Birket Habu, had to forsake its river valley course and for a short distance take to the desert, skirting round the limits both of Malkata and Medinet Habu. At its south-westerly end it passes by the desert altar at a short distance and finally disappears beneath the temple of Deir esh-Shelwit. For Amenophis III, access may have had to have been, beyond the Birket Habu, via the edge of the floodplain.

## APPENDIX

### Surface pottery from the adjacent settlement

An area of disturbed, sherd-strewn debris stretches eastwards from the platform, evidently the remains of a settlement, and marked on fig. 1. A fairly superficial search was made by myself and members of the University Museum expedition for New Kingdom pottery, but no sherds were seen which could be positively identified as such, although with a bowl sherd like no. 1, fig. 4, one could not be entirely certain. But neither were blue-painted nor burnished cream amphora sherds seen which might have been expected on a settlement of Amenophis III's reign. The small collection of sherds made and illustrated in fig. 4, seem as a group to fit best into collections of pottery ascribed to the Third Intermediate Period and Late Period, e.g. from western Thebes and Heliopolis. This would be a very natural conclusion also on grounds of context, since it is presumably a continuation of the later settlement phase around the platform itself, which Myers tentatively ascribed to this period. A corpus of pottery from this part of his excavations is also amongst his records.

The following notes refer to the sherds illustrated in fig. 4:

1. Rim sherd from a large bowl, made in a coarse brown gritty fabric with dark core, with a red unburnished slip over the interior and exterior. A rope impression runs around the exterior (omitted from drawing).
2. Rim sherd from a bowl, made in a brown, slightly gritty fabric, with a thin unburnished buff slip added. The exterior surface is very slightly ribbed.
3. Rim sherd from a vessel probably like Petrie, *Hyksos and Israelite Cities*, pls. 36A. 4; 39E. 121. Coarse brown gritty fabric with dark core, surface altered by weathering.

<sup>19</sup> W. C. Hayes, *JNES* 10 (1951), 36 and n. 12; C. F. Nims, *JNES* 14 (1955), 111 and n. 8.

4. Rim sherd from a storage jar, something like Petrie, *Qurneh*, pl. 49. 783; Hölscher, *The Excavation of Medinet Habu*, v, pl. 47. B3. Pink compact fabric, pale yellow core, with a thin unburnished buff slip on the outside.
5. Rim sherd from a storage jar, something like Petrie, *Qurneh*, pls. 49. 781; 50. 796; Petrie, *Heliopolis*, pl. 33. 44. Pink compact fabric, with a thick buff slip on the exterior.
6. Sherd from the neck possibly of a handled bottle, as in Petrie, *Heliopolis*, pl. 34. 60, 61. Brown gritty fabric, no slip or burnish.
7. Body sherd from a small bottle, in a buff compact fabric, with darker buff slip, unburnished.
8. Sherd from a ring-based bottle, perhaps from something like Petrie, *Heliopolis*, pl. 34. 60-5. Grey, slightly gritty, fabric with smooth unburnished surface.
9. Handle, in a pink compact fabric with pale-brown core. Buff, unburnished slip added.
10. Sherd from a ring-based bottle, made from a pink compact fabric with pale-yellow core and smooth unburnished surface, and slight ribbing on the inside.
11. Base from a closed vessel, perhaps from something like Petrie, *Qurneh*, pl. 49. 773, 774. Pink compact ware, with a thick unburnished buff slip on the outside.



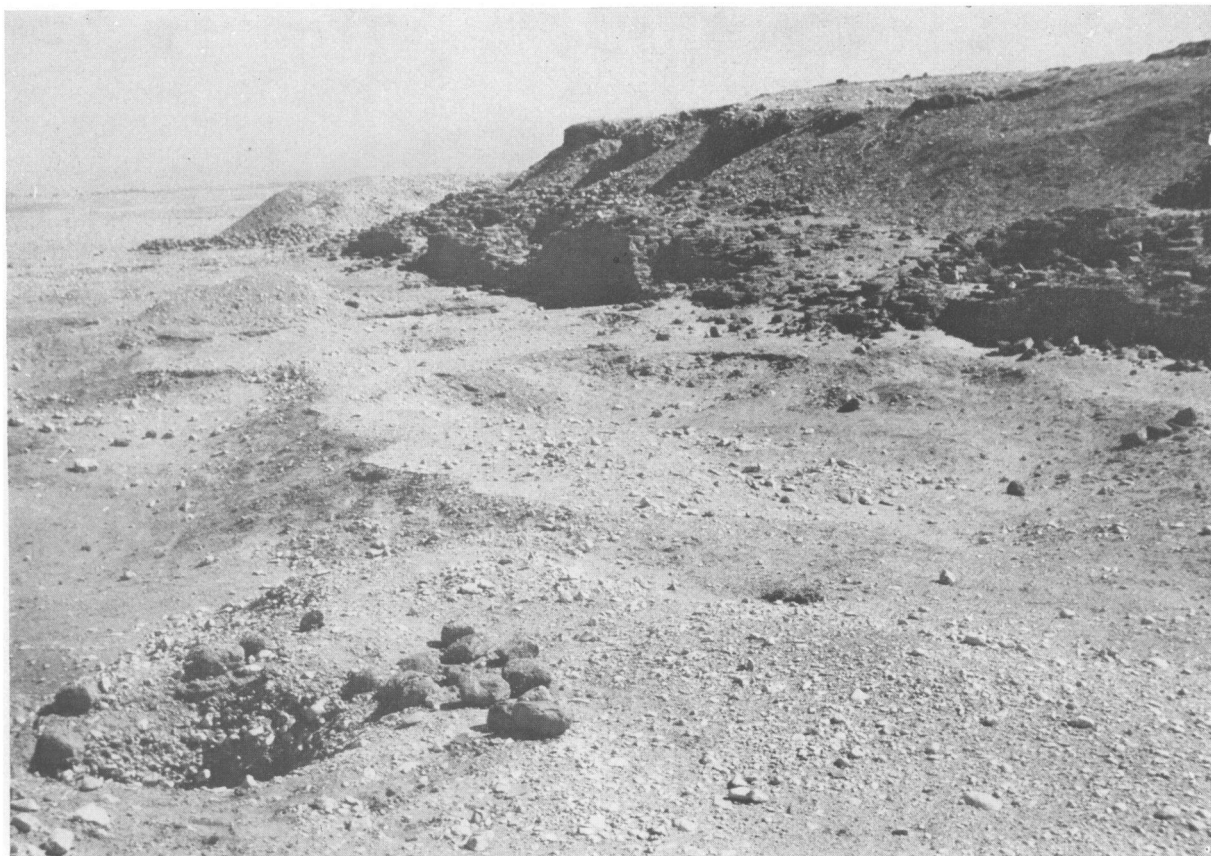
1. Kôm el-ʿAbd: general view from the north-east



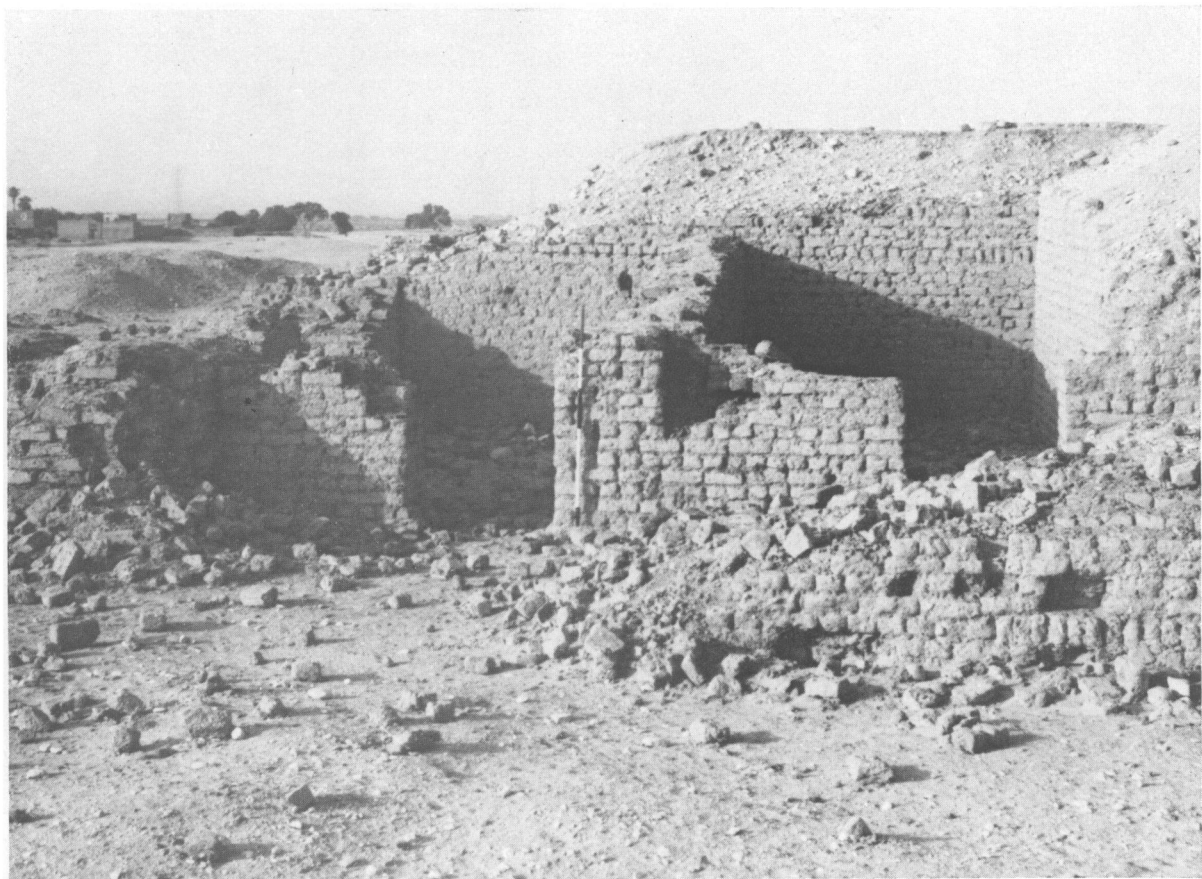
2. Kôm el-ʿAbd: the platform, looking north. The ramp is in the foreground, the denuded remains of the houses are just beginning on the right side of the picture

A BUILDING OF AMENOPHIS III AT KÔM EL-ʿABD





1. Kôm el-ʿAbd: the platform, north-west side facing the desert, looking north-north-east. Note the wall thickening in the middle, and the tree pit in the immediate left foreground. The mounds of the Birket Habu are just visible on the horizon



2. Kôm el-ʿAbd: two of the chambers on the north-east side of the platform, emptied of gravel fill by Myers