ELIZABETH THOMAS (1907-1986) by Barbara S. Lesko

Elizabeth Thomas is best know to Egyptologists for her seminal work on the tombs in the Valley of the Kings, much of which is contained in her invaluable book *The Royal Necropoleis of Thebes*. Born on March 29, 1907, in Memphis, Tennessee, she grew up in Granada, Mississippi, and spent part of her time in nearby Cruger, where members of her family owned Egypt Plantation.[1] The youngest child of Ruth Archer and James Talbert Thomas, she was a self-discribed tomboy who spent much of her childhood tagging along after her older brothers, Tollie (James T. Thomas, Jr.) and Wilmer. In the fall of 1924, Thomas entered Granada College, leaving the following autumn for Hollins College, near Roanoke, Virginia. Although she stayed only a year at Hollins, Thomas remembered her experience there as a very positive one.[2] After a hiatus of nearly a decade, she returned to Granada College in the fall of 1935 and and later transferred to the University of Mississippi at Oxford, where she completed her bachelor's degree in May 1937.

Thomas made her first visit to Egypt within a year of her graduation. To placate her family, who didn't consider it a safe place for a young woman to travel unescorted, she made her travel arrangements with Thomas Cook & Sons.[3] Since the standard itinerary didn't always include the sites she wanted to see or allow enough time to study the monuments in any detail, Thomas took matters into her own hands and hired transportation and guides, striking out into the desert with them as her only companions. In February and early March 1938, she was in Luxor where she spent much of her time on the west bank, visiting the tombs in the Valleys of the Kings and Queens. She also visited Chicago House, the Luxor field headquarters of the Epigraphic Survey of the University of Chicago.[4] There she met Egyptologist Charles F. Nims,[5] who had joined the Chicago House staff after receiving his doctoral degree from the Oriental Institute.[6] She also became acquainted with Myrtle Nims, who had accompanied her husband to Luxor.

After her experience in Egypt, Thomas decided to study Egyptology at the Oriental Institute. She arrived in Chicago in the late summer of 1938, and one of the first people she met when the academic year began was Helene J. Kantor, another beginning graduate student. That fall, Kantor and Thomas studied Hebrew together under Raymond A. Bowman, and shared a history class taught by A.T. Olmstead.[7] In addition to these subjects, Thomas began studying ancient Egyptian language.

Also at the Oriental Institute at this time, though they had all recently completed their doctoral degrees, were Charles Nims,[8] whom she had already met in Egypt, George R. Hughes,[9] and Richard A. Parker.[10] Although a decade ahead in their studies, Nims, Hughes, and Parker were nearly the same age as Thomas, who had begun her graduate work comparatively late.[11] Their mutual interest in ancient Thebes and later shared experiences in Luxor forged ties that kept them in touch with one another both as friends and colleagues long after Thomas had finished her studies and left Chicago.

Because of her delayed start in the field, Thomas's fellow graduate students were often many years her junior. These included Helene Kantor[12] and Caroline Nestmann,[13] both specialists in the Ancient Near East. Somewhat later Thomas became acquainted with Egyptologists Ricardo Caminos,[14] and Klaus Baer.[15]

Although she concentrated on ancient Egyptian language and culture at Chicago, Thomas supplemented her core curriculum with courses in linguistics and English. She also took classes in Hindu philosophy and comparative religions. Her coursework was finished in 1941, and included classes taught by Egyptologists William F. Edgerton, and John A.Wilson, both of whom had been students at the OI under James H. Breasted. She also studied with Keith C. Seele, who had himself been trained by Edgerton and Wilson.

Between 1942 and 1946, Thomas and several of her colleagues from the Oriental Institute contributed to the war effort working for the Army Signal Corps, a branch of the military that, among other things, dealt in cryptography. Numerous scholars of arcane languages were recruited at the time on the theory that they might be good at cracking codes. By this time, Thomas had an extensive knowledge of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, several European languages (including German), and all phases of ancient Egyptian. Her command of such a range of languages, combined with her ability to concentrate single-mindedly on the task at hand, undoubtedly made Thomas an asset to the Corps.

After the war, Thomas went back to her studies, working on her exams and then her thesis. During the 1947-48 field season, she spent some time at Chicago House with her old friends George and Maurine Hughes and Charles and Myrtle Nims. Other residents included Ricardo Caminos, an epigrapher from 1947-50, and Douglas Champion, a Canadian artist who worked at Chicago House from 1947-58.

In the spring of 1948, Thomas completed her master's degree at the Oriental Insitute having written her thesis on the cosmology of the Pyramid Texts. After finishing at Chicago she moved to New York City, first living near The Cooper Union, then taking up residence north of the United Nations headquarters, which was under construction at the time. During this period, she was trying to decide where to set up her permanent residence. Because of its plethora of bibliographic resources, including the New York Public Library with its broad selection of Egyptological literature, and the Wilbour Library of Egyptology at the Brooklyn Museum, New York was an attractive possibility. In the end, however, Thomas chose Princeton, New Jersey, with its rural setting, close proximity to Firestone Library at Princeton University,[16] and easy access to New York.

Thomas returned to Egypt during the 1949-50 field season, this time to work with Alexandre Piankoff on an expedition organized by Natacha Rambova under the auspices of the Bollingen Foundation.[17] The expedition had two goals: recording the religious inscriptions in the tomb of Ramesses VI in the Valley of the Kings, and recording the much earlier texts in nine of the Old Kingdom royal pyramids at Saqqara. Piankoff was director of the expedition, but his primary interest was in the tomb of Ramesses VI. Thomas, undoubtedly chosen because of her work on the Pyramid Texts, was to have the responsibility of gathering and translating the pyramid texts at Saqqara and writing commentaries. On her arrival in Egypt in October of 1949, she went to Saqqara to do some preliminary reconnoitering for the expedition. Unfortunately, only the pyramid of Unas was actually accessible, so the main focus of the project became the tomb of Ramesses VI. Although she went to Luxor in October with the expedition, Thomas withdrew shortly afterward due to differences of opinion regarding methodology.[18]

In 1951, Thomas built her house in Princeton, located on Edgerstoune Road, a mile outside of the center of town. Made to her specifications, it consisted of one large central room with a fireplace at one end, surrounded on three sides by windows with bookcases beneath. A kitchen, bedroom, bathroom and garage were attached to this central area. The property included ample space for a large garden in the back. When in Princeton, she would rise early, spend time in the garden, then work on her Egyptological projects for several hours before lunch. In the afternoon, she would walk along the dirt road beyond her house, then run errands in Princeton or visit Firestone Library, and return home for more work.

In 1953, Thomas planned an extended trip to Egypt. She shipped her car, and also took her cocker spaniel, Uni (pronounced Weni, and named for the Fifth Dynasty Egyptian king Unas). The experiences of her drive up the Nile resulted in a letter published in the *Newsletter* of the American Research Center in Egypt, which gave advice to ARCE members who might want to undertake a similar expedition.[19]

While in Luxor, Thomas used Chicago House as a base for her studies. It was at this time that her interest in the Theban royal cemeteries began. She noticed that most of the tombs in the Valley of the Queens were still partially filled with debris, and discovered that none had been fully published. Even the more famous tombs in the Valley of the Kings, which had been commented upon by European travelers and scholars for several hundred years, had not been thoroughly studied.[20]

After returning from Egypt, Thomas worked on several articles that were accepted for publication in the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*. She also started planning for another major field season in Luxor. Her initial idea was to study the tombs in the Valley of the Queens, and to get permission to clear some of the uninscribed tombs in both the Valley of the Queens and the Valley of the Kings in order to find foundation deposits and try to identify the tombs' owners. In the fall of 1959, Thomas and Uni returned to Egypt. Again her base was Chicago House, with its superb library, and her old friends, the Hughes (Hughes had become director in 1946) and the Nims.

Thomas spent nearly every morning on the west bank, returning to Chicago House to go over her notes, draw her plans, and look up references in the library in the afternoon and evening. She quickly realized that clearing tombs was out of the question in a single season. Instead, she concentrated on recording the visible decoration in the little known Valley of the Queens tombs, and making accurate plans and elevations of all accessible tombs in both royal valleys and several subsidiary wadis. She even rented a camel and transported one of the Chicago House ladders into the desert to get access to the queens' cliff tombs in the southwest wadis.

Although Thomas funded her 1959-60 field season, she had been working under the auspices of the American Research Center in Egypt.[21] After completing her season, she submitted a brief report on her work "to offer further details in case of present need by any of you, and to ask for such additional information as you may be able to give me."[22] This give and take of scholarship was typical of Thomas, who was always generous with her own information, and was constantly

in contact with people whose work could inform her own. An example of this occurred in 1961 when she was concentrating on Valley of the Kings tomb 55 (or KV 55 as she called it). Having learned that three articles on the tomb were to appear in volume 47 of the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, she offered use of the plan and elevation that she had drawn from her own measurements in the tomb.[23] Later, she gave a number of her tomb plans to Rosalind Moss of the Griffith Institute, who was in the process of revising the Theban volumes of the *Topographical Bibliography*.[24]

After returning from Egypt in early 1960, Thomas began analyzing her notes and plans. Her focus, which had originally been the Valley of the Queens, and the uninscribed tombs in the Valley of the Kings, had expanded to include all of the royal cemeteries. To further her study, she visited the Griffith Institute at Oxford University to examine Howard Carter's notebooks, and made numerous visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to study Herbert Winlock's archival material on the Theban necropolis. She also spent many hours consulting available literature and corresponded extensively with other scholars.

After finishing her manuscript, Thomas contacted publishers. However, though she got several expressions of interest, and at least one offer to publish, she was never satisfied with the proposed formats for reproducing her drawings of the tombs, which she wanted published at a large enough scale to be useful. In the end, she published her book in a small edition of ninety copies, covering the costs herself. Reproduced from her manuscript that was hand-typed on 11x17 inch paper, *The Royal Necropoleis of Thebes*, presents a history of the royal cemeteries (Dynasties 11-20), from their inception to their study in modern times. The volume provides the first published information on many of the Queens tombs, and the first comprehensive treatment of the Valley of the Kings as a whole. There are also chapters on the royal mummies, inscribed material from the tombs, the tomb robbery papyri, and a discussion of the component parts of the royal tomb. Since its publication, *Royal Necropoleis* has been an invaluable resource for anyone studying the royal cemeteries of Thebes.

Elizabeth Thomas died November 28, 1986 in Jackson, Mississippi. Though she never returned to Egypt after her 1959-60 season, Thomas continued to study the Theban necropolis, carrying on a voluminous correspondence and exchanging information with colleagues of all ages who studied the subject. Ancient Egypt and Thebes were by no means her only interest, however. She kept herself well informed on the current affairs of Egypt and the Near East by

subscribing to a number of newsletters on the subject. She was also a lifelong student of Eastern religions, and commuted from Princeton to New York City each week in the early 1950s to study with the great Zen master, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki who was at Columbia University.[25] In her will, Elizabeth Thomas made a generous gift of her excellent personal library and papers to the Institute of Egyptian Art and Archaeology at the University of Memphis.

Photo #1

Elizabeth Thomas and Myrtle Nims on the roof of Chicago House. Taken February 23, 1938 by Charles Nims. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute.

Photo #2

Elizabeth Thomas with Uni and Peter Shore on a trip to Aswan. Taken January 21, 1954 by Helene Kantor. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute.

ENDNOTES

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[1] Much of the information in this biographical sketch comes from conversations I had with Elizabeth Thomas during our ten-year acquaintance. For further personal details, I am indebted to Mrs. Charles F. Nims, Mr. Douglas Champion, and Dr. Rita E. Freed.

[2] At our first meeting, Thomas and I discovered our shared association with Hollins College. Not long afterward, she sent a cryptic postscript to the effect that "Hollins Egyptologists lack last names," which I eventually interpreted to mean that she wanted me to call her Elizabeth.

[3] Elizabeth Thomas described this trip to me on one of my visits to Princeton.

[4] One of the Chicago House guestbooks has the signature: Elizabeth Thomas Grenada, Mississippi, U. S. A. 2/28/38. For information on Thomas's visits to Chicago House I am indebted to the current director, Dr. Raymond W. Johnson, and to Eleanor Smith, who provided me with photocopies of dated photographs and Elizabeth Thomas's guestbook signature.

[5] Summary information on All of the scholars mentioned here (including Elizabeth Thomas) may be found in Bierbrier, M. L. *Who Was Who in Egyptology*, third ed. Egypt Exploration Society: London (1995).

[6] For more information on Charles Nims, see *Serapis* 6 (1980), pp. 1-5.

[7] Kantor describes their first meeting and the classes they shared in letters to her parents that are now in the Kantor archives at the Oriental Institute. My thanks to John A. Larson, Archivist at the Oriental Institute, for locating references to Thomas in Helene Kantor's papers and giving me access to this information.

[8] Six months older than Thomas, Nims had completed his PhD at the OI in 1937 and then joined the Epigraphic Survey in Luxor.

[9] Born the same year as Thomas, Hughes finished his PhD at the OI in 1939 and was working as a research assistant on the Demotic Dictionary project during Thomas's first years at the OI. For more information on Hughes, see *Studies in Honor of George R. Hughes, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization*, no. 39, The Oriental Institute: Chicago, IL (1976).

[10] Just a year older than Thomas, Parker had just received his PhD when Thomas arrived in Chicago.

[11] When Thomas began her graduate work in the fall of 1938, all four were 31 years old.

[12] Born in 1919, Kantor attended the O.I. between 1938 and 1945 when she received her Ph.D.

[13] Better known by her married name, Caroline Peck, Nestmann was born in 1921. She arrived at the OI in 1942, and received her PhD in 1949.

[14] Caminos, who was born in 1915, arrived in Chicago in 1944, as Thomas was completing her studies, and completed his phD in 1947.

[15] Almost 25 years younger than Thomas, Baer was born in 1930. He began his studies at the University of Chicago in 1948 and received his PhD from the OI in 1958.

[16] Over the years, Elizabeth Thomas formed a close working relationship with the librarians, giving them suggestions for acquisitions of Egyptological literature.

[17] For general information on this expedition, see: William Mcguire, *Bollingen: An Adventure in Collecting the Past*, Bolingen Series, Princeton University Press: Princeton, N.J. (1982); Michael Morris, *Madame Valentino: The Many Lives of Natacha Rambova*, Abbeville Press: New York (1991); Rosalind M. Janssen, "From Hollywood to Thebes: in quest of Natacha Rambova (1897-1966), *Götinger Miszellen* 153 (1996), pp. 5-15.

[18] Mcguire, *op.cit.*, p. 162.

[19] "On Travel by Car in Egypt," *NARCE* 13 (September 1954), 5-6.

[20] The one exception, the tomb of Ramesses VI, would be published the next year. See Alexandre Piankoff and N. Rambova (ed.), *The Tomb of Ramesses VI*, Bolingen Series XL, Pantheon Books, Inc. New York (1954).

[21] This arrangement was noted in *NARCE* 35 (1959), 1. Her work that season was also noted in *NARCE* 37 (February 1960), 3, 9, and in *NARCE* 38 (April 1960), 5.

[22] "Report from Miss Elizabeth Thomas," *NARCE* 41 (March 1961), pp. 9-17.

[23] "The Plan of Tomb 55 in the Valley of the Kings," *JEA* 47 (1961), p. 24.

[24] See Bertha Porter, Rosalind L.B. Moss, and Ethel W. Berney, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings:* I *The Theban Necropolis*, part 2 *Royal Tombs and Smaller Cemeteries*, second edition, Oxford University Press (1964), p. xxv.

[25] My thanks to Abby M. Lester, Assistant Archivist at Columbia University for information on Suzuki's tenure at Columbia.

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1 "Air Channels in the Great Pyramid," *JEA* 39 (1953), 113.

2 "On Travel by Car in Egypt," *NARCE* 13 (September 1954), 5-6.

3 "Solar Barks Prow to Prow," *JEA* 42 (1956), 65-79, with 8 illustrations.

4 "A further note on rock-cut boats," *JEA* 42 (1956), 117-118.

5 "Terrestrial Marsh and Solar Mat," *JEA* 45 (1959), 38-51, with 14 figures and 4 illustrations on 2 plates.
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6 "Ramesses III: notes and queries," *JEA* 45 (1959), 101-102.
Notice in *NARCE* 38 (April 1960), 10.

7 "Report from Miss Elizabeth Thomas," *NARCE* 41 (March 1961), 9-17.

8 "The Plan of Tomb 55 in the Valley of the Kings," *JEA* 47 (1961), 24.
Notice in *NARCE* 45 (April 1962), 11.

9 "The Tomb of a Nineteenth Dynasty Queen," *NARCE* 45 (April 1962), 6-8.

10 "pæ ãr õní õnw / n õnw ãní," A Designation of the Valley of the Kings," *JEA* 49 (1963), 57-63.

11 "The Four Niches and Amuletic Figures in Theban Royal Tombs," *JARCE* 3 (1964), 71-78.

12 *The Royal Necropoleis of Thebes*, Princeton, 1966
Review in *OLZ* 63 (1968), 550-551 (Eric Hornung).
Notice in *NARCE* 59 (September 1966), 15.

13 "Was Queen Mutnedjemet the owner of Tomb 33 in the Valley of the Queens?" *JEA* 53 (1967), 161-163, with 1 illustration.
Notice in *NARCE* 66 (July 1968), 24.

14 "Cairo Ostracon J. 72460," *Studies in Honor of Georges Hughes* (*SAOC* 39 [1976]),

209-216, with 2 illustrations and 1 figure.

15 “The ‘Well’ in Kings’ Tombs of Bibân el-Molûk,” *JEA* 64 (1978), 80-83.

16 “*Papio Hamadryas* and the Rising Sun,” *BES* 1 (1979), 91-94, with 1 plate.

17 “The þæy of Queen Inhapy,” *JARCE* 16 (1979), 85-92, with 2 figure.

18 “The Tomb of Queen Ahmose (?) Merytamen, Theban Tomb 320,” *Serapis* 6 (1980), 171-182, with 5 figures and 6 plates.

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Varia Aegyptiaca 3 (1987), 3 (Charles C. Van Siclen)

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