



Conclusion at the Capital: MSCD Project Finished 2

The two-year project at Memphis, funded by USAID, concluded in September with a celebration. A walking trail connecting eight cleaned sites along new pathways are ready for visitors to enjoy and see Memphis as they never have before. Signage, brochures, maps, a website, and more help tell the story of ancient Egypt's capital.

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Workman Abbas Eid Shaban and AERA Reis Sayed Salah Abd el-Hakim mount the new signage at the entrance to the Open Air Museum at Memphis while Richard Redding wipes clean one of the signs. Photo by Dan Jones.

Kafr, Village of the Pyramid Sheikhs at Giza

by George L. Mutter and Bernard P. Fishman*

"In proceeding to the pyramids...near the village of Cafr el Batran I was met by two men, who stretched out a red ribbon before my donkey, to intimate that I must stop and give a backshish"

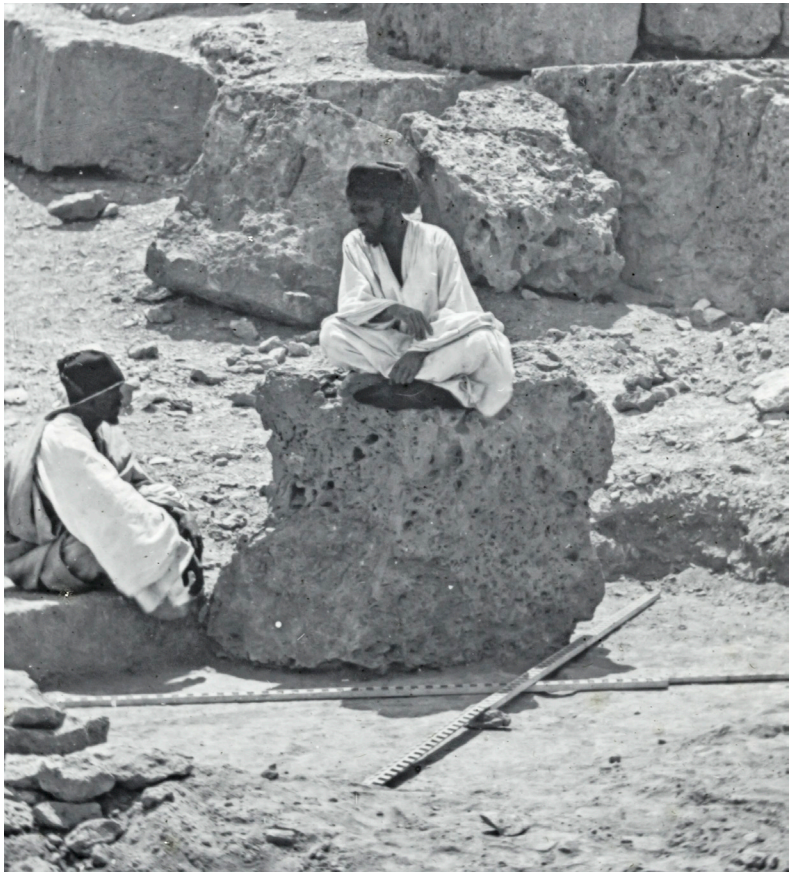
Colonel Howard Vyse, May 23, 1837¹

The Giza village of Kafr figures prominently in 19th century historic accounts and photographs, but its location was lost during expansion and overbuilding of the modern city of Giza. We here use 150-year-old photographic images, and contemporary writings by archaeological explorers, to fix its location today.

Kafr was a village perfectly situated to intercept arriving visitors as they crossed the floodplains from the Nile to the Giza pyramids, a stream of Europeans that increased dramatically following the French invasion by Napoleon. From their elevated position in the village, the headmen or "sheikhs" would see anyone coming from miles away, meeting them en route to offer their services as guides. Thus the people of Kafr became de facto local custodians of the Giza pyramids, and were engaged as workmen by almost all European explorers and archaeologists working on the plateau before 1900. Alee Dobree (photo on the right) was a Kafr villager who served as a basket boy to Howard Vyse,¹ chief assistant to Charles Piazzi Smyth,² and beloved foreman to William Flinders Petrie.³

For these reasons, Kafr (also known as "Cafr," "Cafr el Batran," and the "Northern Pyramid Village") figures prominently in the recent history of the Giza pyramids. Interviews with villagers in 1865 by Piazzi Smyth recorded a tradition where, just after the invasion of Bonaparte, the local fellaheen allied themselves with a "great Sheikh of the Libyan desert."⁴ This Bedouin leader was having trouble feeding his flocks along the sandy plains and decided to settle himself in one of the villages near the Pyramid. He approached the head of the village, married one of his daughters, and offered his livestock and men to cultivate the fields. In 1865, Charles Piazzi Smyth encountered two grandsons descended from this marriage:

*The authors are founders of Photoarchive3D (www.photoarchive3d.org), a high resolution digital archive of over 30,000 historic stereophotographs, including many from Egypt. In addition to a passion for history and preservation of the photographic record, both have day jobs. G. Mutter is Professor of Pathology at Harvard Medical School, and a practicing gynecologic pathologist. B. Fishman is a trained Egyptologist with field experience at Luxor, and museum administrator, who now is Executive Director of the Maine State Museum. They can be reached by email at: gmutter@gynepath.org, bernard.fishman@maine.gov.



Alee Dobree, a Kafr village "pyramid sheikh," sitting on a pyramid block in the northwest socket of the Khufu pyramid. Charles Piazzi Smyth, 1865. Original glass positive stereophotograph labeled in manuscript: "Socket Of Corner-stone Of Ancient Casing Of Great Pyramid, At Its N. West Corner. First Discovered By The French Savants Of 1799. C.P.S. 1865". Digitization and permission courtesy of Photoarchive3D Collection. Online at www.Photoarchive3D.org. [NegNr-018106, ObjNr-008518].

Abdul Samed, the village sheikh of Kafr, and pyramid sheikh Alee Dobree who "is alone, of all the village population, allowed by the Government to retain his gun."⁴ Kafr retained a village sheikh, in addition to several "pyramid sheikhs," who met tourists and supervised excavation crews on the nearby Giza plateau. Smyth observed,

...party after party of travelers, either coming to or going away from the Pyramids; and continuing so to do, from early morn to eve... Our position... in the East Tombs was singularly convenient for overlooking all these social phenomena, and yet without being positively disturbed by them. For, right in front, or eastward, lay the nearest Pyramid village."⁵ (see photo and map facing page).

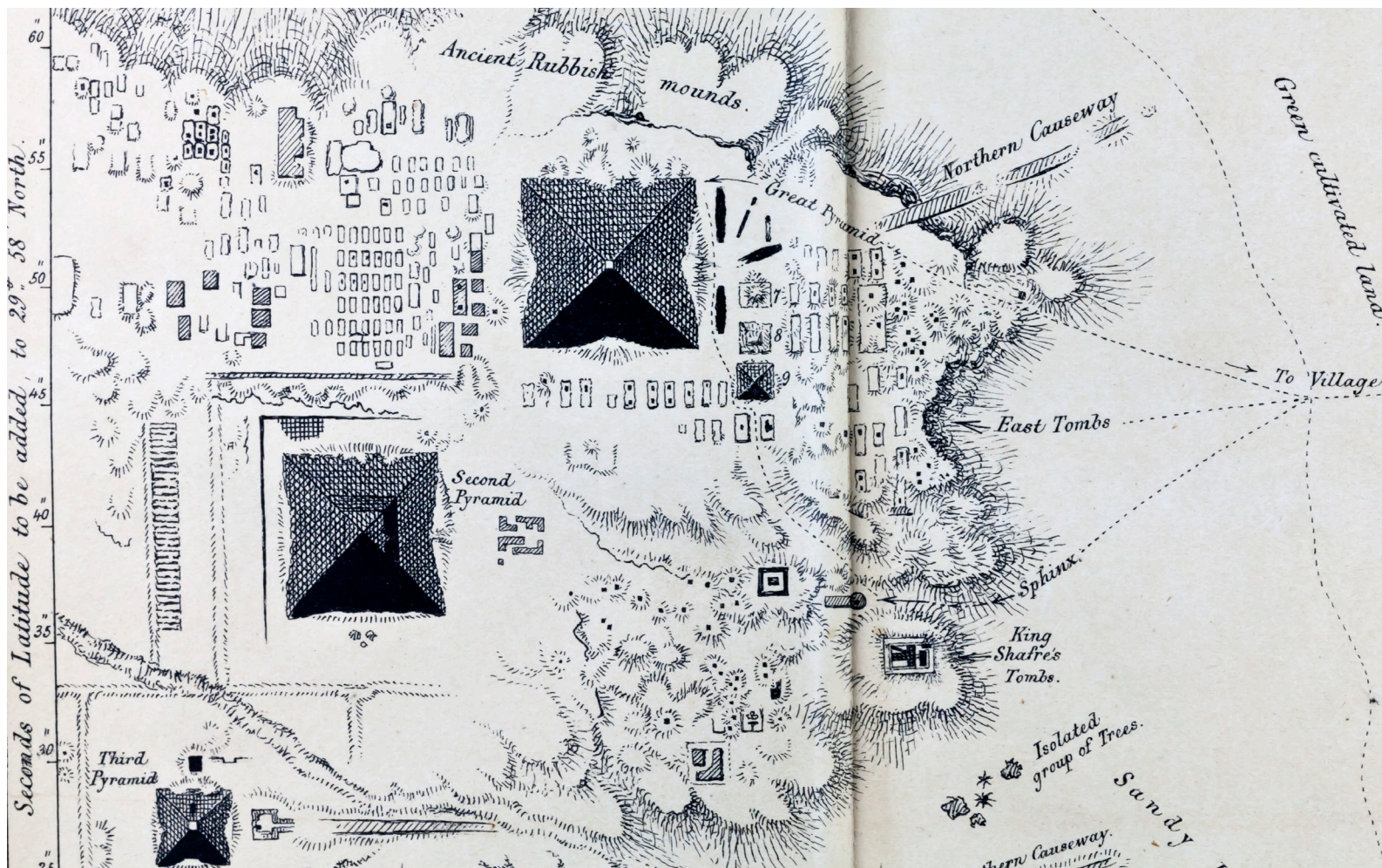
Europeans coming to Giza for more than a daytrip became temporary residents, heavily dependent on the local infrastructure based at Kafr. Prior to the opening of the Mena House



Above: *Photo A.* Giza pyramid village, Nile, and distant Moqattam Hills looking east from the Giza Plateau escarpment as photographed by Charles Piazza Smyth from his eastern tomb encampment. His caption reads, "The northern of the two pyramid villages from east tombs. Instantaneous. Cattle grazing near village. C.P.S. 1865." Half of a stereograph positive on glass. Charles Piazza Smyth, Edinburgh, 1865.

Digitization and permission courtesy of Photoarchive3D Collection. [NegNr-018063, ObjNr-008511].

Below: The Giza Plateau and eastern footpaths to the floodplain village, 1865. Charles Piazza Smyth added the footpath configuration and location to the 1837 map by Vyse.⁶





Hotel in 1886, hardy visitors could bring their own provisions and manage a few uncomfortably hot nights in tents. For longer stays, rock cut tombs had several advantages, including a cool interior, security, and floors that could be brushed clean. Those tombs accessed by vertical shafts were impractical, but walk-through doorways were characteristic of those sunk horizontally into the 130-foot-high, precipitous vertical cliffs on the east side of the plateau. Beautiful views of the Nile Valley, gentle breezes, and a constant parade of new arrivals made these “East Tombs” especially attractive (Photo A, page 11). Thus, the vertically tiered tombs along that section of easternmost cliff from the Khufu causeway, south to the Sphinx (map, page 11), became favorites during the extended stays of Vyse (1837), Piazza Smyth (1865), and Petrie (1880–1882). Limited provisions could be acquired locally through the pyramid sheikhs of Kafr, who made a great show of clearing the tombs of snakes and sand before relinquishing occupancy.

A Village Lost

Several factors contributed to the disappearance of Kafr, long notable for its situation controlling access to the Giza Plateau, and elevation capable of withstanding most Nile inundations. It never was accurately surveyed. Vyse complained in 1837 that the location of the villages was incorrectly recorded by the Napoleonic expedition in the *Description de L’Egypte*,⁷ and most

Photo B. View of the Village looking west from the Nile at Giza. Large format albumen print by Wilhelm Hammerschmidt, Cairo, c. 1858-1860. [NegNr-018696; ObjNr-008768] Digitization and permission courtesy of Photoarchive3D Collection.

detailed maps of structures on the Giza Plateau do not extend very far beyond the Eastern tombs. It is difficult to know which of the conflicting historical maps are in fact accurate.

Another blow came with a decline in local influence of the pyramid sheikhs themselves. In preparation for Empress Eugenie’s 1869 visit to commemorate opening the Suez Canal, an elevated pyramid road was built across the floodplain to the northern aspect of the Giza plateau, site of the future Mena House hotel. This circumvented the traditional visitor path alongside the village, and the pyramid sheikhs no longer found themselves uniquely positioned to intercept tourists.

Lastly, urban development then erased Kafr’s physical presence and dispersed the population. The 1902 Baedeker map of Giza shows no permanent structures immediately at the foot of the eastern escarpment of the Giza plateau.⁸ At that time, the “Arabian village, Kafr” is designated, but it lies east of the cliff-like plateau, off the map frame. Cessation of the annual inundation, with construction of successively higher Aswan dams in 1902 and finally 1964, had the effect of transforming surrounding arable floodplain into potential building sites. By 1928 a new village designated “Kafr el-Samman” (later known



Photo C. Another view of the Village looking west from the Nile at Giza. Half of a stereo pair by Wilhelm Hammerschmidt, Cairo, c. 1858–1860. [NegNr-003532; ObjNr-001744] Digitization and permission courtesy of Photoarchive3D Collection.

as Nazlet es-Samman) appears immediately abutting the Giza Plateau,⁹ and by 1977 the entire ex-floodplain was populated, as shown in the MHR 1977 map (pages 14–15).¹⁰ Thus, the village of Kafr was lost, no longer recognizable by name or geographic location amongst the warren of confluent buildings extending from the eastern cliffs of the Giza Plateau to the Nile.

Mapping of Kafr from the 19th Century Photographic Record

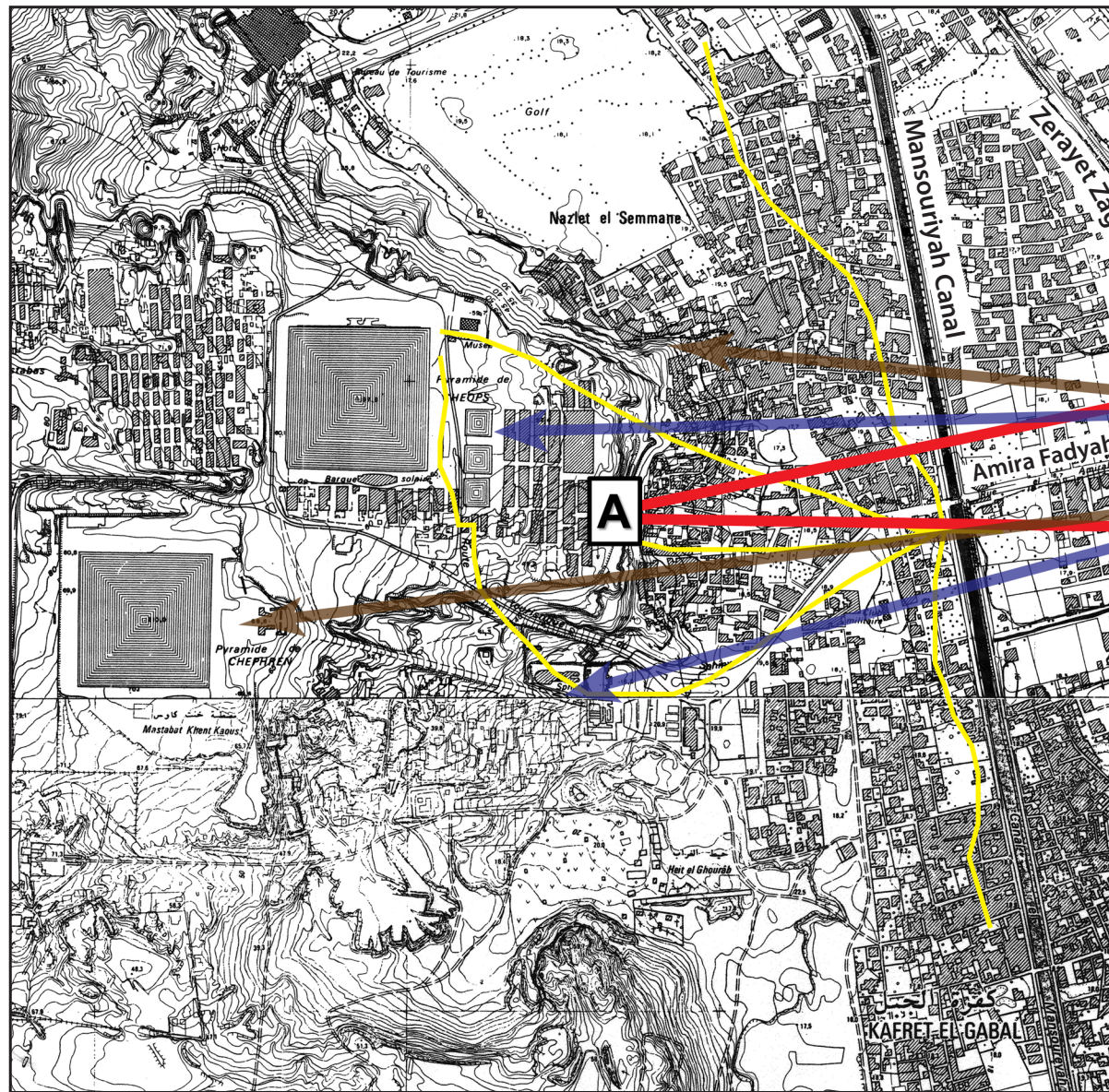
Kafr, the northernmost of several pyramid villages (there was a southern counterpart of lesser prominence), is documented in 1865 photographs of Charles Piazzzi Smyth (page 11) and 1858–1860 photos of Wilhelm Hammerschmidt (photo on facing page and above) as due east of the Khufu pyramid within the floodplain upon an elevated rise crowded with mudbrick buildings and tufted clusters of palms. Its elevation is due to an unknown combination of natural geologic features and accumulated debris of long-term occupation (a tell). The 19th century photographic views, unobstructed by modern buildings,

objectively illustrate the village and its natural topography against prominent monuments and geological features which are conserved to the present day.

An 1865 stereophotograph by Charles Piazzzi Smyth taken from his eastern tomb home (Photo A, page 11) looking eastwards towards Kafr, is accompanied by a map of footpaths from the plateau towards the village (map, page 11). The footpaths are approximate modifications after Vyse, but their general configuration is informative (yellow lines, map page 14), as the photo shows features intervening between the plateau and Nile, including the village, footpaths, and line of cultivation. Viewing the original stereoscopic Photo A (page 11) in conjunction with the map overlay (map, pages 14–15), it is evident that the line of cultivation corresponds to the course of the Mansouriyah Canal, which is located halfway between the photographer's Position A (on map, page 14) and the village. This places the western boundary of the village at or near the more distant Zerayet Zaghloul Canal, also visible in Photo A. The direct west–east path from the eastern tombs to Kafr approximately follows Amirah Fadyah (Al Amira Fadia) Street.

Lines of sight within two circa 1858–1860 westward-facing photographs (Photos B and C, facing page and above) that include both Kafr and plateau monuments were used by the au-

Village position extrapolated from Photographs A-C onto 1977 topographical map. Positions B and C are photographers' vantage points for Photos B and C (pages 12–13), respectively, determined from landmarks exclusive of Kafr village itself. Blue and brown lines are vectors delimiting northern and southern boundaries of the village from viewing positions B and C, as projected from distant landmarks on the Giza plateau. The approximate vantage point of the vintage Photo A (page 11) is known from Smyth's records to be from the eastern tombs, facing east towards the village with left and rightmost image boundaries shown by red lines. The 1865 footpaths are overlaid in yellow, based upon scaled alignment of Piazza Smyth's map (page 11). The background is the 1977 Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction (MHR) 1:5,000 topographical map of Giza, Folio F-17.¹⁰ The green polygon indicates the domain of the 1865 village of Kafr.



thors to delimit the northern and southern boundaries of the village. The location of the photographer was first triangulated by reference to multiple pyramid angles (Points B and C on map on the right) on the plateau. Then, the relative position of the north and south boundaries of the village mound were projected by line of sight from the photographer's position to identifiable landmarks in the background (blue and brown arrows on map above). Combined, these vectors define a perimeter encompassing the putative domain of Kafr village (green overlay on the two maps). The highest elevation contour lines within the delimited region measure 20.9 meters above sea level, at a vertical height some 3 meters greater than that of the surrounding flatland with elevation of only 17.1–17.6 meters above sea level (brown overlay on map on facing page). Knowing the village was elevated to this approximate extent above the floodplain, we assign the historic village of Kafr to latitude 29°58'43.87" N, longitude 31°9'1.51" E, which is in the Giza neighborhood presently known as Nazlet el Sissi.

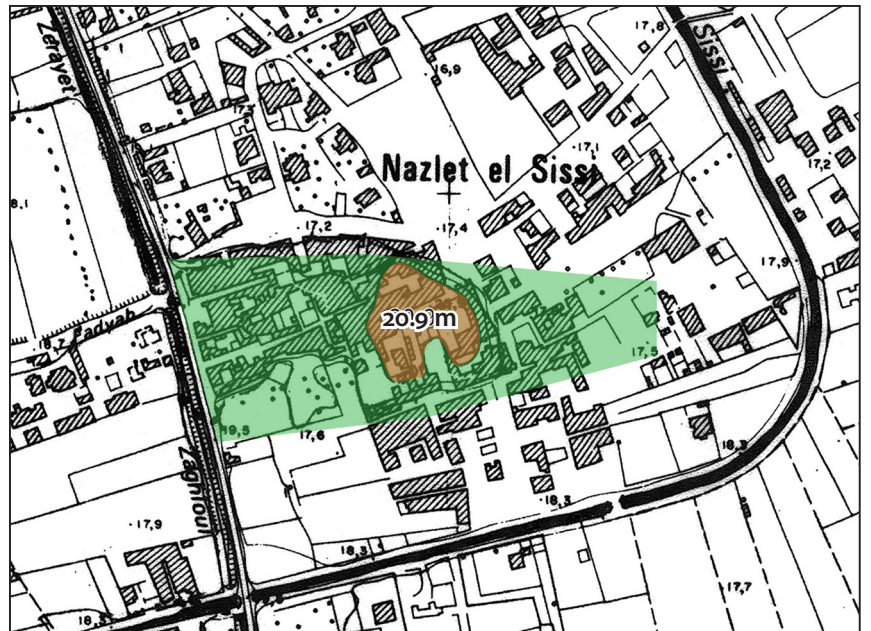
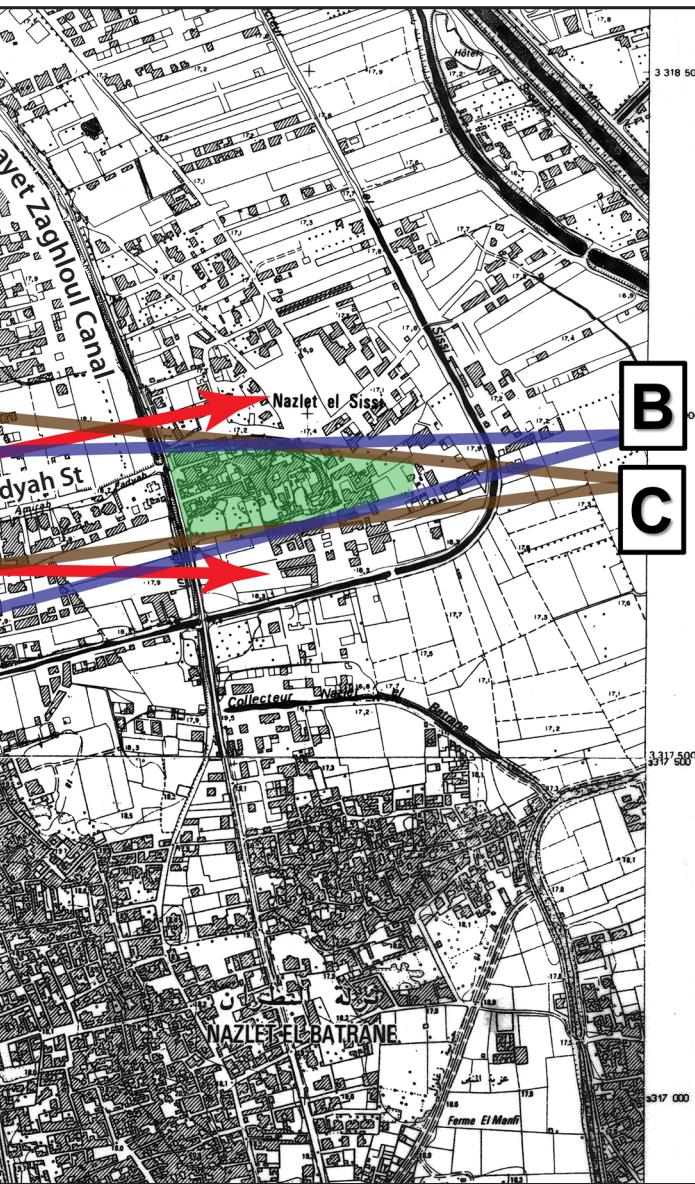
Conclusions

Kafr is important, as a point of contact, and collaboration, between European explorers and native Egyptians. The contributions of the "pyramid sheikhs" to our understanding of the Giza Plateau have been explicitly acknowledged by Smyth

and Petrie, who respectively note that Alee Dobree was "a man of sterling moral worth; endued too, with quite enough general knowledge to become a very good helper in mechanical researches about the Great Pyramid,"¹¹ and "was a greater help in measuring than many a European would have been."¹² The sheikhs carried forward local skills, and knowledge, between expeditions. When the engineer Inglis, working with Charles Piazza Smyth to uncover all four corner sockets of the Khufu pyramid, had trouble locating that in the northwest, one of the Kafr sheikhs stated that members of the Napoleonic expedition had marked the spot with a pyramid block. This is the story of the photo on page 10, fittingly documented.

Our work demonstrates the unique value of early photography in documenting monuments and structures that have become lost or unrecognizable. Internal reference to preserved landmarks, such as those which figure so prominently at Giza, allowed precise localization of Kafr.

Settlement at that specific site in the 19th century was no accident, having been particularly advantageous because of its



Above: The 19th century village of Kafr is in the Nazlet el Sissi neighborhood. The 19th century photographic record defines an outer perimeter (light green) for the current location of the village, lying east of the Zerayet Zaghoul canal. The highest local elevation at 20.9 meters elevation above sea level (brown) is approximately 3 meters higher than immediate surroundings.

protected elevation within cultivated fields of the floodplain. We can only speculate on what came first: a natural elevation that attracted settlement, or a manmade accumulation of underlying debris.

An interesting AERA archaeological discovery of the last decade is that what we now know as Kafr, or Nazlet el Sissi, was probably flanked on the west by a contiguous Old Kingdom harbor and canal that served the monuments of the Giza Plateau.¹³ Further textual evidence comes from a cache of 4th Dynasty papyri published in 2017 from the site of Wadi el-Jarf on the Red Sea, where an official, “Inspector Merer,” involved in transporting Tura limestone by ship for construction of the pyramid of Khufu references the *She Khufu*, or “Basin of Khufu.”^{14, 15} This raises the possibility that the village of Kafr might incorporate, or be built upon, the *Ro-She Khufu* or “entrance to the pool of Khufu,” mentioned by Merer as part of the ancient harbor complex at Giza. This is unproven, but we know where to look if that idea is to be tested.

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2. Smyth, C. P., *Life and Work at the Great Pyramid*, Vol. I, Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1867.
3. Petrie, W. M. F., *The Pyramids and Temples of Gizeh*. New York: Scribner, 1883.
4. Smyth, 1867, page 401.
5. Smyth, 1867, page 121.
6. Smyth map: Smyth 1867, Plate 2; Vyse map: Vyse 1840, page 1.
7. Vyse, 1840, page 277.
8. Baedeker, K. (ed.), *Egypt: Handbook for Travelers*, 5th ed., Leipzig: K. Baedeker (firm), New York: C. Scribner's Sons, Map #8, “Pyramids of Gizeh,” page 113, 1902. Map designates “Arabian Village (Kafr)” in position of Nazlet el Sissi.
9. Baedeker, K. (ed.), *Egypt: Handbook for Travelers*, 8th rev. ed., Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, New York: C. Scribner's Sons, Map “Pyramids of Gizeh,” page 132, 1929.
10. Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction (MHR) 1:5,000 topographical map of Giza, Folio F-17, 1977 survey, published 1978.
11. Smyth, 1867, page 96.
12. Petrie, 1883, page 6.
13. Lehner, M., “On the Waterfront: Canals and Harbors in the Time of Giza Pyramid-Building,” *AERAGRAM* 15-1 & 2, drawing pages 18–19, 2014. Available for free download at aeraweb.org.
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