

By: Sachin 2008, Science Editor

The Gold of the Pharaohs

Where did it come from?

How much gold did the ancient Egyptian goldsmith process? The historian Hecateus of Miletus (4th century BC) said the extracted gold would raise to 32 million Greek mines (the 'mine' was the ancient Greek unit of mass; the amount in discussion represents about 10,000 tonnes!), a highly exaggerated number. The study of the hieroglyphs carved on the walls of the temple of Karnak, representing the annals of Tutmosis III, from the 18th dynasty, about 1504-1450 BC, reveals that the gold amount extracted during the first three years of the pharaoh's rule was of 829 kg (1,850 pounds). But the main question is: where did the gold of the pharaohs come from? Where was the Egyptian El Dorado placed? The annals of Tutmosis III say that about 90 % of the gold came from a zone called Wawat; the rest was alluvial gold collected from the sand of the Nile River and its affluents, until upper Nubia, in today's northern Sudan (the Kush gold) and southern Egypt (Coptos gold). Carved inscriptions and information offered by chronicles and maps placed Wawat along the dry beds of Nile affluents, like Allaqi and Gabgaba, but their precise location was not found anywhere. To find the place, luck and perseverance were required. Still, on the 12th of February, 1989, three Italian researchers (brothers Angelo and Alfredo Castiglioni, plus Giancarlo Negro) discovered Wawat in the desert located between Egypt and Sudan. The discovery was made after consulting tens of maps and books in museums of Europe and Egypt, even the old geography work "The Papyrus of Pharaoh Seti I", "Natural History" of Pliny the Elder, "Universal History" of Diodorus Siculus and Arab texts and maps from the end of the 13th century, talking about the Allaqi fortress, a mysterious place in the middle of the Nubian desert, where auriferous (gold bearing) quartz was found. In a bend of Allaqi, the explorers discovered the old city of Berenice Pancrisia: two ruined forts and a dwelling. The two bastions had been rebuilt during the Arab epoch, being part of a settlement stretching over 400 square meters, by the sides of a 5 m (17 ft) wide main street, crossed by many secondary streets. [img=2]Once, the two edifices were surrounded by tens and tens of other buildings and smaller arrangements, all connected to ore extraction. The whole settlement was an Arab city, inhabited by about 10,000 people. Before this, it had been a Ptolemaic city, built on the basic nucleus from the pharaohs' era, under the name of Berenice Pancrisia (the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty ruled Egypt from the conquest of Alexander the Great until its Roman conquest, and pancrisia means "totally made of gold" in Greek). On Arab maps, the city was named Ma'din ad-Dahab. Subsequent research confirmed the city was a mining one, and even women and children were involved in gold extraction. The researchers counted that, for the golden mask of Tutankhamon, 11,000 tonnes of rock had had to be broken and ground. Death must have been a relief for the slaves working in these mines.