

# THE CAIRO DAHSHUR BOATS BY PEARCE PAUL CREASMAN

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### 4,000 Year-old Boats from Ancient Egypt

In AD 1894, while excavating the pyramid complex of Senwosret III, French archaeologist Jean-Jacques de Morgan unearthed the world's oldest collection of contemporaneous boats available for study. Senwosret III ruled ancient Egypt from 1870-1831 BCE. The most powerful ruler of the Twelfth Dynasty, and one of the most powerful in all of ancient Egypt, he led his people through a renaissance. The inclusion of boats in the burial arrangements of such a powerful king underscores the importance of watercraft in their ancient culture.

Today, four of these boats can be located; two are in the United States, one in the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh and one in the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, and the remaining two are on display in The Egyptian Museum, Cairo. The comparison of these boats provides a rare and unique opportunity in nautical archaeology.

Since their excavation the boats in Egypt boats have remained relatively inconspicuous and largely unpublished. Here, I present a summary of the interpretations and conclusions from my thesis: *The Cairo Dahshur Boats* (TAMU, 2005). I employed personal recording of the boats to reveal the unique characteristics of the hulls and to better understand the philosophy employed by those who built the boats.



### Conclusions

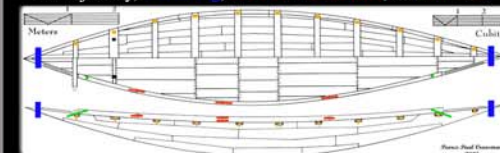
In the 1980s, the two Dahshur boats in the US were thoroughly studied. This study incorporated only basic measurements from the two boats that remained in Egypt. Consequently, for the last 25 years all interpretations and conclusions regarding ancient Egyptian shipbuilding trends were developed accordingly, neglecting critical information. Evidence from my research in Cairo supports a drastic reinterpretation of ship construction methods from the world's first maritime civilization.



The base of this theory was congruent with earlier Egyptian construction practices. However, "lashing-theory" neglects contemporary evidence (above- lower right) and offers a structurally weak joining method. If lashings existed on the Dahshur boats, they more likely resembled the archaeologically confirmed style.

Yet, when the current method is superimposed, in scale, over the more likely contemporary style, it indicates that lashings were not possible. Wood would have had to been reconstituted to support the dovetails as currently found on the boats, and this is not the case. Other technological indicators found only on the Cairo boats, such as deck planking pegged to the throughbeams, support a conclusion that neither lashings nor dovetails were original to the boats.

I propose that neither dovetails nor lashings were necessary to support the vessel and that several less costly methods already present in the hull interacted to maintain the integrity of the boats; such as arches, interlocking planking, deep mortise-and-tenon joinery, and lacing, secured washstrakes, and trunnels.



### The Pharaoh

In ancient Egypt, the pharaoh Senwosret III, known later as the deity *Sensuweret*, reigned for thirty-nine years, 1870 to 1831 BCE. This was the golden age of the Middle Kingdom. As pharaoh he led his people to great military victories that re-conquered the Upper Nile. Under his guidance Egypt expanded its borders farther than ever before.



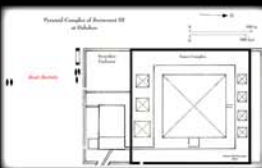
According to ancient customs, by ensuring that their pharaoh repeated his life in afterworld, the populous ensured repetition of their own lives as well. So, it should come as no surprise that when their beloved pharaoh died, no expenses were spared.



Unfortunately, the pharaoh's pyramid at Dahshur was a target for looting and grave robbing over the millennia. Yet, the excavations in AD 1894 revealed great finds, including several small boats: transportation for the afterlife.

### The Excavation

In 1894-1895 J.J de Morgan, Director-General of Antiquities in Egypt, excavated Senwosret III's pyramid complex at Dahshur.



Senwosret III's pyramid complex yielded the second most valuable treasure hoard ever found in Egypt (behind only King Tutankhamun's).



De Morgan's publication of the excavations, (*Fouilles à Dâhchour*, 1895) came at a time when archaeology was still developing as a science.

Due to its exceptional organization, the report is often credited as the first "professional" archaeological site report.

In the report de Morgan mapped five boats while noting that he sent two to the museum in Cairo. Today, these boats remain on display as they have for over 100 years.



### Recording & Research



In December 2003, I wrote to the Director of the Cairo Museum and requested permission to record the boats in their care.



In record time (three weeks later!) I received a favorable response. Even on short notice several organizations found ways to support this incredible opportunity the following May.

Over the last three years, five fellow Texas A&M graduate students have accompanied me to Egypt. We have invested more than 5000 man-hours in recording these long forgotten boats.



Each season proved more successful than the previous. The first season educated us on the proper method of conducting research in Egypt while the second produced quality measurements. The third was incredibly productive and resulted in detailed drawings, complete scantling lists, 3-D reconstructions, and secured us an invitation to participate in a pair of public television documentaries.

This project would not have been possible without the support of the current director of the Egyptian Museum Dr. Wafaa El Saddik, assistant curator Waheed Edwar and Egypt's Supreme Council on Antiquities. The contributions of RFM Nautical Foundation, Institute of Nautical Archaeology, L.T. Jordan Institute for International Awareness, Melberrn G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research, and Dr. Donny L. Hamilton made this project possible. The input and guidance of Dr. Cemal Pulak and Dr. Felipe Castro were indispensable.