



# Wadi es-Sebua: the temple of Amenhotep III

Wadi es-Sebua in northern Nubia is known mainly for the temple of Ramesses II but the much smaller temple of Amenhotep III is little known and is now submerged by the waters of Lake Nasser.

**Martina Ullmann** describes the recent rediscovery of wall paintings from the temple.

The east-west oriented *speos* temple of Amenhotep III at Wadi es-Sebua is situated c.200m south of the original site of the now-relocated Ramesside temple, and consists of a small rock-cut sanctuary with, in front, several rooms, built mainly of mud-brick, two courtyards and a *dromos* leading towards the riverbank. The rock walls in the *speos* and the cliff face in front of it had been covered with a thin layer of mud plaster, lime-washed as a base for the decoration. In the early twentieth century remains of the wall decoration were still preserved in the main hall, on the façade of the *speos* and in the *speos* itself.

Shortly before the flooding of the area in 1964 seven panels of the wall decoration were removed, placed in wooden frames, and deposited in the basement of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Since this operation had never been properly documented and published, the knowledge of it became lost and the whereabouts of the paintings were not generally known until November 2008 when, after a two year long search, I was able to identify them in the Museum's basement. In October 2010 all seven panels were digitally photographed and a small series of test cleanings took place, enabled by a grant from the Antiquities Endowment Fund of the American Research Center in Egypt.

The preserved panels are:

**The sanctuary's façade, south and north part** (nos.1–2 on the plan).

The largely destroyed upper registers showed Amenhotep III standing with offerings before a deity, most probably Amun. In the lower registers minor deities present offerings. Three accompanying inscriptions mention

*Plan of the temple of Amenhotep III at Wadi es-Sebua (based upon I Hein, Die Ramessidische Bautätigkeit in Nubien, Göttinger Orientforschungen, IV. Reihe: Ägypten 22, edited by F Junge and W Westendorf (Wiesbaden 1991), pl. 7).*



The temple of Ramesses II in 1962. To its left are the remains of the mud-brick temple of Amenhotep III. Photograph: Martin Davies

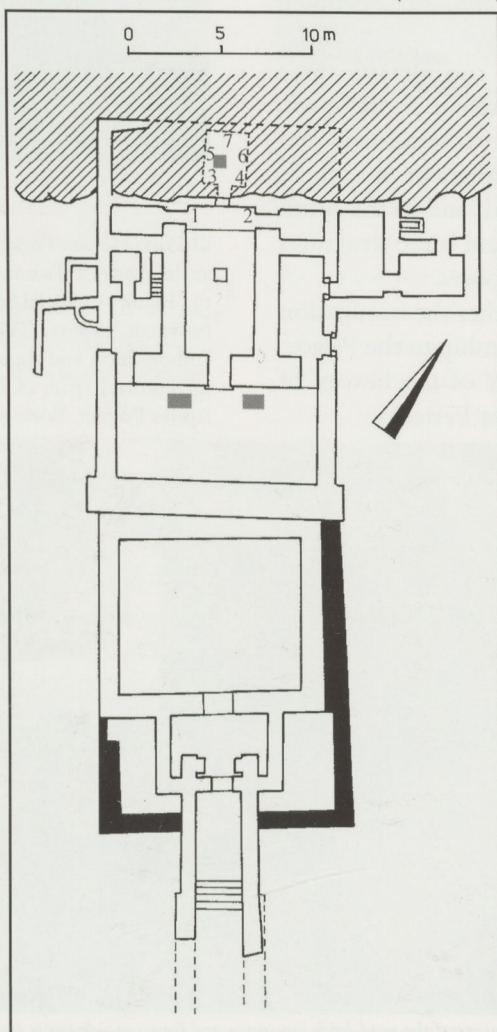
the bringing of the products in favour of 'Amun, the Lord of the Ways'.

**The sanctuary's east wall, south and north of the entrance** (nos. 3–4). These two severely damaged panels

consist of two vertical lines with the names and titles of Amenhotep III, beloved of Amun.

**The south and north wall of the sanctuary** (nos. 5–6). Both of the partly damaged side walls show the king – presumably originally with libations and incense – in front of the enthroned Amun with traces of his reworked name and epithets in front of him. Between them, offerings are set up, with a large offering list above.

**The west wall of the sanctuary** (no. 7): In the right half of the rear wall, which is largely destroyed at the top, Amenhotep III is shown before the enthroned Amun. In the left half of the rear wall, which is damaged at the top and the southern edge and largely destroyed in the lower part, a vulture, wearing the white crown, is shown, hovering with folded wings above a clump of papyrus, with *shen*-rings in its claws. Above each of the wings are two feathered cartouches of Amenhotep III. At the far left a ram's head rests on a high pedestal, surmounted by an ostrich feather fan. The





*The west wall of the sanctuary. Left: as photographed in situ in 1964 by Martin Davies. Right: in 2010 as preserved on the panel. Photograph Katy Doyle*

accompanying inscription is to be read as ‘Amun-Re, Lord of the [sky]’.

Comparison of the paintings with photos taken in the 1960s shortly before their removal shows that some parts have been heavily damaged in the meantime.

What makes the rediscovery of the paintings especially valuable is the fact that the decoration on the façade and inside the rock-cut sanctuary shows numerous alterations which bear witness to several phases of reworking. Cecil Firth in 1910 had already described traces of earlier paintings and Christiane Desroches Noblecourt in her book *Le Secret des Temples de la Nubie*, gives three drawings of the paintings on the rear wall of the *speos* which she assigns to three subsequent phases but without distinguishing between visible traces and reconstruction. One of the main goals of the ongoing project, therefore, is an in-depth investigation to achieve a reliable reconstruction of the different decoration phases of the innermost part of the temple.

The remains of the wall decoration encompass three different phases of decoration, reflecting cult activity in the temple from the reign of Amenhotep III until at least

the reign of Ramesses II, probably even longer, but with two breaks in the cult focus.

In the first phase the main deity was ‘Amun, Lord of the Ways’, as shown in the inscriptions on the façade of the *speos*. On the left half of the rear wall Amun was shown sitting in front of an offering table and oriented towards the left. Traces of the yellow throne, red body and yellow feather crown can be seen beneath the papyrus clump and the vulture of the later phases. In the middle of the rear wall a vulture with the white crown hovering above a clump of papyrus was in the first phase placed more to the right (see the black feathers from the wing of the vulture of the first phase underneath the enthroned deity of the later phases). In the right half of the rear wall within the first phase Amenhotep III was shown presenting a water cup to the vulture goddess. Most probably, the large offering scenes on the side walls of the *speos* were also dedicated to Amun during the first phase of the decoration.

In the second phase cult activity in the temple shifted from Amun to a falcon-headed deity with the double crown. This is shown by the remains of such a god



*The panel of the north wall of the sanctuary in 2010. Photograph: Katy Doyle*



Part of the west wall showing traces of two different decoration phases underlying Amun: the black feathers of the vulture goddess of phase 1 beneath the upper part of the god's body of phases 2 and 3; traces of a black wig and a double crown in white and red including the red volute in the upper part which most probably belong to a falcon-headed deity of phase 2.

Photograph: Martina Ullmann

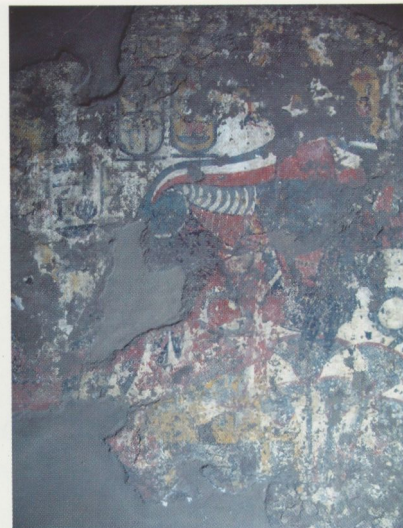
underneath the (third phase) depictions of Amun on the side walls of the *speos*, and by modifications on the rear wall of the *speos*. The vulture above a papyrus clump motif was moved to the left, making way on the right half of the wall for an offering scene of Amenhotep III – carried over unaltered from the first phase – in front of an enthroned falcon-headed deity wearing the double crown. To the left of the papyrus clump, a pedestal was introduced in the second phase upon which a falcon-head crowned by a sun disc rested, representing the sun-god Re-Horakhty.

Who was this enthroned falcon-headed deity? His name is not preserved but he is probably Amenhotep III in his function as a living Horus or living sun god upon earth.



Test cleaning at the west wall. Photograph: Martina Ullmann

Left half of the west wall showing traces of the phase 1 enthroned Amun beneath the papyrus motif of phases 2-3. Photograph: Martina Ullmann



Such an emphasis on the royal cult fits extremely well into the historical context of the later reign of Amenhotep III and the time of his successor Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten and

representations of Amenhotep III as a falcon are well documented in statuary and in relief. Several temples in Nubia provide evidence for a cult-receiving function of a divine manifestation of Amenhotep III, as at the temple at Soleb, where Amun-Re and Amenhotep III as a god called 'Nebmaatra, Lord of Nubia' with his own distinctive iconography were the main deities. The god 'Nebmaatra, Lord of Nubia' seems also to have been part of the pantheon in the temples at Sedeinga and Sesebi.

This second phase of decoration dates most probably to the last decade of Amenhotep III's reign when a new cult in the sanctuary of Wadi es-Sebua, oriented towards the king in his divine manifestation as Horus, could have been motivated by the first Sed Festival in the king's 30th regnal year. During the reign of Akhenaten all remaining traces of the god Amun inside the temple decoration were removed, including the name of Amun within the cartouches of Amenhotep III. Apart from this the decoration seems not to have been altered.

In the third phase, either executed as early as the time of Tutankhamun or later in the reign of Ramesses II, the decoration within the *speos* was reworked to focus cult activity once more exclusively on the god Amun. The cult-receiving deity in front of the offerings on both side walls became Amun again, and similarly on the right half of the rear wall. The falcon head on the pedestal at the far left was changed into a ram's head surmounted by an ostrich feather fan, representing Amun. Thus the emphasis of the first phase of decoration was re-established with Amun once more the main deity of the temple, primarily in his specific local aspect as 'Lord of the Ways'.

□ Martina Ullmann is an Egyptologist at the Institute of Egyptology at Munich University. Thanks are due to Zahi Hawass, Wafaa el-Saddik, and Sabah Abdel-Raziq for the opportunity to work in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo and to photographer Katy Doyle and conservators Luigi de Cesaris (†), Alberto Sucato, and Emiliano Ricchi. The work in October 2010 was financed by ARCE's Antiquities Endowment Fund. The writer is extremely grateful to Martin Davies, Vice-President of the EES, who generously provided her with photographs from Wadi es-Sebua taken by him in 1962 and 1964 and to Aidan Dodson who brought the existence of this rare material to her attention.