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The Temple of Amenhotep III at Wadi es-Sebua

WADI ES-SEBUA in northern Nubia is mainly known for the large temple built by Ramesses II in the 5th decade of his reign. This Ramesside sanctuary was not, however, the first Egyptian temple at this spot: about 150 years before Ramesses II, Amenhotep III had already established a temple there. This much smaller building from the 18th Dynasty is less well known, probably because it was never thoroughly investigated and published and because it has been submerged by the waters of the Lake Nasser for over 40 years.

The ongoing project, which was presented at the 12th ICE in Cairo, aims to reconstruct the significance of the temple of Amenhotep III at Wadi es-Sebua within the ritual landscape of Lower Nubia. At the core of the project are the wall paintings in the central sanctuary of the temple which, when the area was flooded by the waters of Lake Nasser in 1964, were removed, inserted into seven wooden frames and transferred to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (EMC). However, knowledge of their removal and the new location of the paintings had been lost, and it was only a few years ago, that they were rediscovered and investigated in the magazines of the Egyptian Museum.¹

The significance of the project derives from the following points:

- The 18th Dynasty temple at Wadi es-Sebua is the only cult building from the period of Amenhotep III in northern Nubia of which substantial parts have been documented and preserved;
- The relatively small corpus of painted temple decoration—in contrast to carved decoration—from the mid 18th Dynasty is considerably enlarged by the paintings from Wadi es-Sebua;
- The iconographic program of the rear wall of the sanctuary is in some parts extremely unusual;

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1. The project originally began in 2008, when the paintings were identified in the basement of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo by Sabah Abd el-Raziq and the author. In 2010, work on the paintings in the museum started with comprehensive photographic documentation and a small series of test cleanings. The planned continuation of the work in 2011 and 2012 was cancelled due to the political situation. It was only in 2018 that the work could be restarted as a joint research project between the Institute of Egyptology at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich (Martina Ullmann), the Roemer- and Pelizaeus-Museum Hildesheim (Regine Schulz) and the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (Sabah Abd el-Raziq, Moamen Mohamed Othman). In the meantime, Kathryn Piquette from University College London's Centre for Digital Humanities joined the team and a collaboration was established with Mona Hess from the Centre for Heritage Conservation Studies and Technologies at the University of Bamberg.

- The paintings show numerous traces of reworking, which relate to up to four different decoration phases within a very limited time span of a few decades. An art historical and religious analysis is therefore particularly important. One of the most remarkable features is that the main recipient of the temple cult seems to have been changed twice during this time. Thus, the reworking bears witness to religious changes from the later reign of Amenhotep III, during the Amarna Period and afterwards.

The project encompasses the conservation, documentation, investigation by various techniques and analysis of these unique examples of temple paintings, as well as a virtual reconstruction of the cult building and its phases of use. Finally, this shall lead to a reconstruction of the interactions between changing religious ideas and royal ideology in the later 18th Dynasty and their transfer into the decoration of cult buildings and ritual activities. Another ultimate goal of the project is to present the wall paintings after research and conservation treatment to a general audience in the EMC.

1. TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

The east-west oriented temple of Amenhotep III is situated 169 metres to the southwest of the Ramesside temple and consists of a small rock-cut sanctuary with, in front, several rooms, mainly built of mud-brick.² In the centre was an elongated hall (3,9 metres wide; 8,12 metres long), probably surmounted by a mud-brick vault. A sandstone altar or pedestal (with cartouches of Ramesses II) stood roughly in the middle of the hall. In front of the hall and its side rooms there were two relatively large courtyards and a *dromos* leading towards the riverbank. Amenhotep III is recorded in the wall decoration as the king responsible for the erection of the cult building. Some extension and restoration work were undertaken during the reign of Ramesses II. The rear wall of the main hall was formed by the cliff face. Along the east-west axis of the temple lay the entrance to a small rock-cut chamber (2,27 metres wide; 2,9 metres long; 1,9 metres high). A rectangular altar or pedestal made from sandstone stood inside the speos. Doubtless this small rock-cut room functioned as the sanctuary, where the main deity of the temple was provided with the appropriate ritual performances.

A virtual reconstruction of the temple was begun in 2019.³ It includes the main building phase of the temple in the reign of Amenhotep III and the second phase during the reign of Ramesses II, as well as the “archaeological” phase in the 20th century, before the flooding of the area in 1964. All phases are reconstructed by using published and archival documentation.

2. For a plan of the building see ULLMANN 2013, p. 38.

3. Conducted mainly by Nicoletta Campofiorito and Petra Olosz under the supervision of Mona Hess (Centre for Heritage Conservation Studies and Technologies, University of Bamberg). The results will be published in an online database in the near future.

THE SANCTUARY'S WALL PAINTINGS

The rock walls inside the speos and the mud-brick façade before the cliff face had been covered with a thin layer of mud plaster with a lime wash as a base for the decoration. In the early 1960s the paintings inside the speos were still well preserved, while the decoration of the outer façade had suffered considerably since the early 20th century, when Cecil Firth undertook the first comprehensive documentation of the temple.⁴ Comparison of the paintings now kept in the EMC with photos taken in the 1960s shortly before their removal shows that some sections were heavily damaged during the removal and remounting process.

The sanctuary's façade, south and north part:⁵ 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 the bringing of the products for "Amun, the Lord of the Ways", i. e. the local form of Amun.

The sanctuary's east wall, north and south of the entrance: these two panels each consist of two vertical lines with the names and titles of Amenhotep III, beloved of Amun.

The south and north walls of the sanctuary: both of these 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: on the right half of the rear wall Amenhotep III is shown offering water to the enthroned Amun. On the left half a vulture, wearing the white crown, is depicted, hovering with folded wings above a clump of papyrus, with *shen*-rings in its claws. Above each wing are two feathered cartouches of Amenhotep III. At the far left a ram's head rests on a tall pedestal, surmounted by an ostrich feather fan. The accompanying inscription reads "Amun-Re, Lord of the [sky]".

DISCUSSION OF THE PAINT LAYERS ON THE WEST WALL OF THE SANCTUARY

In the following, a selection of the numerous modifications traceable in various parts of the paintings will be presented and their significance and possible interpretation will be discussed. Since these remarks are based on work in progress, they are mainly of a preliminary nature.

Already in 1910 Cecil Firth had described traces of remodelling of the paintings⁶ and Christiane Desroches Noblecourt published three drawings of the paintings on the rear wall of the speos which are supposed to reflect three subsequent decoration phases, but without distinguishing

4. FIRTH 1927, pp. 235–237, pls. 31–34, plan XIV.

5. For drawings of the temple paintings see FIRTH 1927, pls. 31–34; for photos taken in 2010 in the EMC see ULLMANN 2011, pp. 16–18, figs. 2–8.

6. FIRTH 1927, pp. 236–237.

between visible traces and reconstruction.⁷ One of the main goals of the ongoing project, therefore, is an in-depth investigation of the different layers of the paintings to achieve a reliable reconstruction of the different decoration phases inside the sanctuary.

During our work in the EMC in March and April 2019 we undertook multimodal imaging of the wall paintings. Our work focused mainly on those areas of the paintings that show evidence for reworking but remain difficult to interpret. The suite of optical techniques employed included photography using visible, ultraviolet (UV) and infrared (IR) light, with Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) providing particularly valuable image data.⁸

The investigation of the west or rear wall of the sanctuary (fig. 1) revealed very complex sequences of paint layers in different parts of the wall, which remain only partially understood. It became clear that the different segments of the decoration underwent various alterations at different points in time. Most of the modifications can be assigned to four main decoration phases, with the first and second phases dating to the reign of Amenhotep III, the third phase belonging to the Amarna Period and the fourth phase dating to the post Amarna or early Ramesside time. There is one exception: the figure of the standing and offering king to the right shows no traces of reworking. It can be firmly dated to the reign of Amenhotep III by its proportion and style.⁹

The observance that the “vulture with white crown surmounting a clump of papyrus” motif was originally placed directly in the centre of the wall (already recognised by Firth and Desroches Noblecourt)¹⁰ was confirmed by numerous traces of paint belonging to the black feathers from the right wing of the vulture of the first phase underneath the enthroned deity of the later phases to the right of the vulture motif.

But our work also revealed that some earlier assumptions about the reconstruction of the decoration of the rear wall of the first phase most probably need to be thoroughly revised: Firth, followed by Desroches Noblecourt, proposed that an enthroned god was depicted to the left of the central vulture motif and oriented to the left, i.e. towards the south wall.¹¹ A very unbalanced composition like this one, in the right half of which the king offers towards the vulture goddess in the centre of the wall, whilst in the left part an enthroned god is placed without anyone attending to him, would be quite unique. After scrutinizing the different layers of paint within the area in question, we cannot confirm the depiction of an enthroned god to the left of the vulture in the first decoration phase. Taking into account the two preserved cartouches of Amenhotep III situated to the left of the head of the vulture, which we believe belong to the first decoration phase,¹² as well as

7. DESROCHES-NOBLECOURT 1999, p. 156.

8. Kathryn Piquette (UCL) undertook this work in spring 2019 with the help of several members from the Conservation Department of the EMC.

9. Photos taken in the early 1960s, which show the depiction of the king in a much better state of preservation than today, confirm this dating, see ULLMANN 2013, p. 39.

10. FIRTH 1927, p. 237, pl. 34 middle; DESROCHES-NOBLECOURT 1999, drawing on p. 156, discussion on pp. 158–159.

11. FIRTH 1927, pl. 34 middle; DESROCHES-NOBLECOURT 1999, drawing on p. 156, text on p. 158.

12. These cartouches are similar in style and proportions to those on the right side before the standing king which are firmly dated to the first phase and are placed on the same line as the last ones, whereas the cartouches to the right of the vulture's head added in the second phase are of a different style and placed higher than those on the left.

the Egyptian artistic tendency towards symmetry, we come to the—albeit preliminary—conclusion that the decoration on the left part of the wall essentially mirrored that of the right part, i.e. a figure of the king standing and offering towards the central vulture motif.

In the second decoration phase, which probably took place in the later reign of Amenhotep III,¹³ the central vulture motif was moved from the middle of the wall to the left (as seen now). This shift made way on the right half of the wall for the insertion of an enthroned deity, who then became the recipient of the offering presented by—the unaltered—Amenhotep III on the extreme right. To the left of the vulture motif now occupying parts of the area of the standing and offering king (as proposed above for the first phase), a pedestal was introduced upon which rested a falcon-head crowned by a sun disc, representing the sun-god Ra-Horakhty. This reconstruction is suggested by the remains of an inscription in front and above the pedestal that can be read as “Ra-Horakhty” before it was altered to “Amun-Ra” in a subsequent decoration phase.

One of the most intriguing questions is the identity of the enthroned deity on the right of the vulture motif that was inserted in the second phase. Desroches Noblecourt proposed a falcon-headed deity with a double crown, but without providing the suitable empirical basis for this reconstruction.¹⁴ Therefore, we paid particular attention to this issue when studying the traces in the area of the head and crown of the deity. We observed several anomalies in the human face of the god belonging to the latest phase four, which might be interpreted as the remains of an earlier falcon’s head altered subsequently to a human face (e.g. the outer contour of the face, the shape of the eye). The remains of a black wig at the rear of the head can also clearly be seen. In addition, our RTI images reveal traces of a non-human head beneath the head of Amun, whose brushstrokes appear to follow the contour of a falcon’s head (figs. 2–3). Directly above the falcon’s head, the remains of the lower edge of a large sun disk can also be distinguished. This leads to the conclusion that on the rear wall (and also on the north wall, where similar traces can be found), the cult recipient of the second decoration phase of the sanctuary had been a falcon-headed deity crowned with a sun disk. On the basis of this iconography, the god might be identified as Ra-Horakhty, which would also be consistent with the probable presence of a falcon’s head with a sun disk in the left part of the rear wall during the same decoration phase.

The third decoration phase of the rear wall is characterized by the erasure of the name of Amun within the cartouches of Amenhotep III, which strongly points towards the later reign of Akhenaten. Beyond this alteration, the decoration of the rear wall seems not to have been adjusted. The name of Amun was also eliminated from the side walls and the façade of the sanctuary.

During the fourth decoration phase, either executed as early as Tutankhamun or later in the reign of Ramesses II, Amun’s name was inserted again and the enthroned deity on the right half of the rear wall was transformed into a figure of Amun with a human face and a tall feather crown (the same can be said for the side walls).

The possible falcon’s head set upon the pedestal on the far left of the composition in the second decoration phase, was changed into a ram’s head, surmounted by an ostrich feather fan, representing Amun, which is substantiated by the accompanying inscription (which overwrites the earlier Ra-Horakhty inscription).

13. The cartouches newly added in this phase are still the ones of Amenhotep III.

14. DESROCHES-NOBLECOURT 1999, drawing on p. 156, text on p. 159.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned before, the suggested sequence and interpretation of the decoration phases inside the sanctuary of the temple of Amenhotep III at Wadi es-Sebua need further corroboration and elaboration by the ongoing work on the project. But we can safely state that this provincial temple was kept very much up-to-date with changing ideas in religion and royal ideology in the time of Amenhotep III, Akhenaten, and the aftermath of the Amarna Period. What began as a cult building for the local form of Amun as “Lord of the Ways” was apparently transformed into a place of worship for the sun god in his form as Ra-Horakhty—and thereby kept in accordance with the evolving solar theology of the later reign of Amenhotep III. And since Amenhotep III during his last years and subsequently in the reign of his son Akhenaten was considered as the living Ra-Horakhty,¹⁵ it might very well be that the main cult recipient in this period was seen as the divine Amenhotep III. This theory offers also an explanation for the fact that, apart from effacing the name of Amun, the decoration program was otherwise unaltered during the reign of Akhenaten. After the Amarna Period, however, the ritual focus was shifted back to the original local form of Amun—again in accordance with the state religion. In the later reign of Ramesses II the sacred landscape at Wadi es-Sebua was augmented by a huge new temple dedicated primarily to Amun-Ra and, thus, the older sanctuary nearby was incorporated into a larger local ritual network.

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15. On the divine Amenhotep III, see JOHNSON 1993; JOHNSON 1998 and BICKEL 2002, each with further literature.

16. Due to the restricted length of each contribution to the proceedings the bibliographic references have been kept to a minimum; for additional references regarding the temple in question see ULLMANN 2011.



Fig. 1. West wall of the sanctuary, taken in 2010.



Fig. 2. RTI image of the head of the enthroned deity on the west wall, taken in 2019.



Fig. 3. For comparison: a depiction of the falcon-headed Ra-Horakhty from the tomb of Seti I, KV 17 (detail).