

The Discovery of the Palace of Merenptah at Memphis

BY ALESSANDRO PEZZATI

Memphis, Egypt was one of the largest cities of antiquity. According to tradition, it was founded by the mythical king Menes, the first pharaoh and unifier of Upper and Lower Egypt, ca. 3000 BCE. It was the capital throughout the Old Kingdom, and was only rivaled by Thebes and Alexandria many centuries later. It was not abandoned until the time of the Arab conquests and the founding of Fostat (now part of Cairo) in 641 CE.

The site of Memphis is 15 miles (25 km) south of Cairo, and, for centuries, its great ruins were pillaged to build the nearby Arab cities. By the time archaeologists arrived in the 19th century, Memphis was mostly hidden underground, much of it below the water table. Its lack of obvious architecture and massive size made it less appealing and notoriously difficult to excavate. The great British archaeologist Flinders Petrie worked there from 1909 to

1913. The Penn Museum, with the backing of coal heir Eckley Brinton Coxe, Jr. (President of the Museum Board in 1910–1916), was passionate about ancient Egypt and hired Clarence Stanley Fisher (1876–1941) in July 1914 to head its Egyptian archaeology program. By the end of the year he was in the field. The outbreak of World

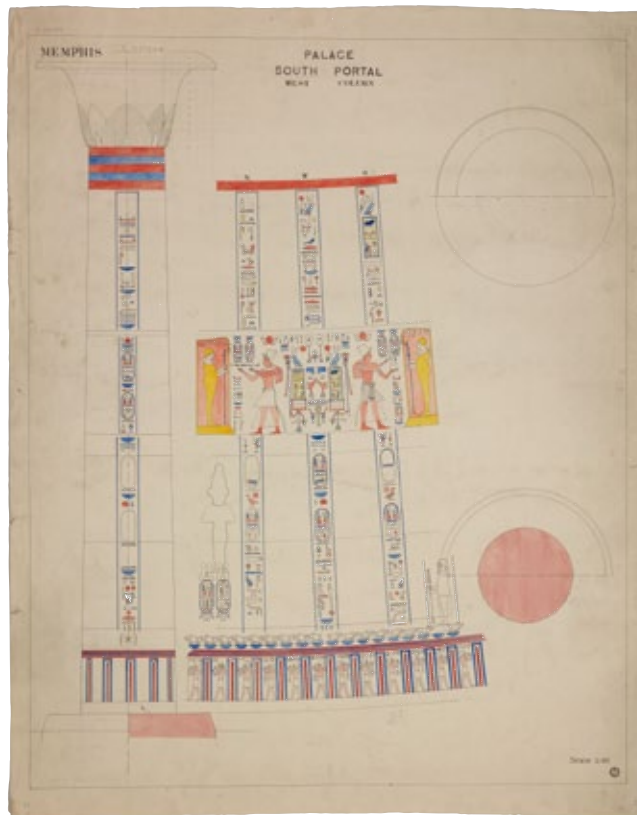


TOP: Beginning of the excavations at Memphis, April, 1915. The Nile is behind the palm trees. (UPM Image #36668) BOTTOM: General view of the Palace of the pharaoh Merenptah (1213–1204 BCE) showing progress of the excavations at the South Portal, 1915. (UPM Image #33944)

War I that year meant that Egypt became an English Protectorate, and most of the European permits for excavation in Egypt were put on hold. As an American institution, the Penn Museum was not hampered by the war, and soon obtained permission to excavate a portion of Memphis.

According to *The Museum Journal* (VIII, 4; 1917), Fisher was influenced in his selection of the site by the discovery the previous year by C. C. Edgar, the Inspector of Antiquities for Lower Egypt, of cartouches of Merenptah in a small room that had been exposed by villagers, indicating a royal structure. Working in that area with a force of 180 men and laying a railroad section to haul away the dirt, Fisher uncovered the Palace of Merenptah, the 13th son and successor of Ramses II, who ruled from 1213 to 1204 BCE.

Shortly after Merenptah's death the mud-brick palace burned, and the collapse of the building helped to preserve it. The complex, used for state occasions, covered two-thirds of an acre. Fisher excavated a large courtyard, a throne room, and the private living quarters of the pharaoh. The palace had been splendidly decorated: the walls were stuccoed and painted in bright colors, and massive doorways and colonnades were carved



Column (UPM Object #E13577) from the Palace of Merenptah. Pen and ink drawing with watercolor by Clarence S. Fisher, ca. 1920. UPM Image #244785

prepared the Museum to build a new wing, the Eckley Brinton Coxe, Jr., Egyptian Wing, in 1922. Construction was completed by 1924, but it took two additional years to move the collections into the wing, including the pieces of the palace and the Museum's sphinx. Unexpectedly, the floor of the 3rd floor Egyptian Gallery, where the palace elements were to be displayed, was not built



and painted. It is a prime example of Egyptian royal architecture.

Fisher obtained a number of architectural elements from the palace for the Penn Museum, including columns, doorframes, lintels, and a monumental gateway. More than 50 tons of objects were shipped back to Philadelphia in 1924. Sadly, Eckley Coxe had died in 1916 at the early age of 44. But his bequest

to carry such a load. The pieces were thus moved to the lower gallery, but due to the height of the ceiling, the portal and columns have never been displayed at full height.

The dream to display the palace in its glory has not died. In the 1970s, after the completion of the Academic Wing, the Museum proposed to create a glass-enclosed gallery in one of the inner courtyards to house the pieces. Unfortunately, the cost proved to be excessive at the time. The Penn Museum has recently renewed efforts to move the palace upstairs. The hope is to display the gateway and the columns as the ancient Egyptians last saw them. ●

Alessandro Pezzati is Senior Archivist at the Penn Museum.