THE AKHENATEN TEMPLE PROJECT
AND KARNAK EXCAVATIONS

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Scholarly study of the reign of Akhenaten, pharaoh of Egypt (ca. 1375–1357 B.C.), has focused on justification on the last thirteen years of his life and the new capital he founded in Middle Egypt at Amarna. Investigation of this latter site is rendered difficult, however, by the fact that the city was almost completely razed within a generation of Akhenaten’s death, and its masonry removed to neighboring towns as new building material. To date only some 2,000 relief blocks from buildings originally standing at Amarna have been recovered from neighboring Hermopolis.

This paucity of material is not found at Thebes, the earlier capital of Akhenaten which he occupied during the first five years of his reign. Here, as early as the second quarter of the 19th century, the ruins of Karnak and Luxor had begun to yield blocks of a standard dimension, 52 x 22 x 22 cm, which the natives called “talatat.” By the mid ’80s of the present century over 100,000 of these blocks had come to light, some 35,000 being decorated on one or more sides with parts of relief scenes. Beyond the obvious fact that the talatat were cut and decorated by Akhenaten, and certainly belonged to long-dismantled structures of his at Thebes, nothing was known of purpose or date, or the number and identity of the buildings themselves. It seemed clear to all that, should it be possible to fit back together these “jigsaw” pieces of reliefs, decorated walls would begin to take shape and in fact the temple would be reconstituted. But no ground plans were visible, and so thorough had been the destruction that even the sites of the buildings were unknown.

Attempts to study the talatat seriously were rare and desultory before the late 1960’s. Then the vast restoration program at Karnak set on foot by the inspector of antiquities, Henri Chevrier, brought tens of thousands of new talatat to light from inside later construction, and made immediate study imperative. Nevertheless, storage facilities at Karnak were so poor that most of the newly extracted blocks, many brightly painted, were forced to remain in open-air stacks, a prey to the elements, and only a few were stored in a magazine. Moreover, the conditions under which the blocks were recovered were less than ideal, there often being no recording supervisor on the spot while the laborers worked. The result was that the storage areas were rapidly filled with a jumble of blocks, no two originally contiguous fragments being together, and there being no direct means of telling where a given block had come from. Scholarly study of the talatat during this period (ca. 1945-1965) was restricted to random selection and study of the “best” pieces, subjectively chosen, and art books would feature photographs taken in desultory fashion to illustrate a particular point, not to elucidate the talatat themselves.

In 1965 a retired American diplomat of distinguished career, one Ray Winfield Smith, became interested in the problem of the Karnak talatat. He conceived the plan of photographing all the Karnak talatat to scale, both those still in the Luxor area and those taken to Europe and America, and, with the aid of computer science, of attempting to reconstruct the relief scenes of which they were once the components. In 1969 Mr. Smith secured the sponsorship of the University Museum, amassed a skilled staff of Egyptologists, partly Egyptian, partly British, and set to work on a project which had become by this time a compelling dream. Smith was indefatigable in his pursuit of talatat. All the blocks at Karnak were photographed to scale, and then the intrepid investigator set out on a search which led him to Frinton, Germany, Switzerland and the U.S.A. Everywhere talatat were photographed, and Egyptologists willingly offered their own photos. Prof. W. Helck of Hamburg gladly lent his collection of photographs, the earlier collection of Prof. Legrain was secured, and M. Chevrier, now in retirement, offered by letter what his memory retained of the period when the blocks were being removed.

The success of the project, dubbed the “Akhenaten Temple Project,” was phenomenal. The photographs were subjected to a rigid classification, and very soon matches began to be made. All photographs were classified according to content, and contact photos were mounted on glass plates. As matches were made, the photographs in question were removed from their respective “classification” plates, and mounted on “temporary scene” plates, which themselves were classified according to the content of the scene, thus “king and queen,” “priests,” “servants,” “nudist scenes,” “offerings” etc. To date thousands of these embryonic scenes have been put together, and matches between individual scenes, in fact, are not uncommon.

The work was carried on in Cairo, which constituted the headquarters of the Project. Here were available facilities for developing and printing of photographs, the drawing of facsimiles, and a library for research. Five years of the Project had produced a mass of partly digested material and the time had come for publication; and consequently the year 1971 witnessed increased research with a view to preparing a MS. From the outset the Project had enjoyed the services of a wide range of consultants, including Professors Abu Bakr of Cairo University, John Wilson of the University of Chicago, Sayed Twalid of Cairo University, and Mr. Gerhard Harary of the Swiss Archaeological Institute in Cairo. Chapters in the publication were assigned to Prof. Abu Bakr, Dr. Kamal Sadik of the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation, Prof. Twalid and Mrs. Iocelyn Goharry, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Liverpool working on the Project in Cairo. By dint of hard effort, and the services of two gifted artists, Mr. Leslie Greener and Mr. Joseph Clarke, the line drawings and the first half of the projected volume were completed in December 1971. The second half achieved MS form in September 1973, and
the entire work, the first of a projected three volumes, was published in 1977. The work of the ATP, by the very nature of the material it had to deal with, is concentrated in the formative period of Akhenaten’s program, viz. the first five years of his reign. At this time the king’s thoughts were undergoing change, and a good deal of experimentmentation informed the new, “expressionistic” style of art. ATP has elucidated all stages of the new program to a remarkable degree. Chief among our findings was the hitherto unsuspected prominence in the relief decoration of Nefertiti, the chief royal wife of the heretic king. Although this beautiful lady’s parentage and pedigree remain unknown, she is represented in the painted reliefs of her husband’s temples nearly twice as often as he himself; and one whole structure, “the Mansion of the Bubn-stone” (gbet-hbn) shown only Nefertiti and her daughters in its decoration. We also know that the inscription of the new art form was attended by some uncertainty among the master artists who were commissioned by pharaoh to usher in the new relief art. The king must have admired his ideas in general terms, and left it to his chief draftsman to effect his wishes in detail. At least six different treatments of the king’s form are discernible in the talatat reliefs, attesting apparently the latitude in interpretation permitted by the vagueness of the initial directives. Only later at Amarna was the revolutionary art form confined in a single “canonical” channel.

Another discovery of note was the hitherto unsuspected fact that Akhenaten had erected at Thebes prior to his departure to Amarna at least eight structures, probably all temples. Judging by the frequency with which they are alluded to, four of these buildings were large and imposing. The largest, called the Gerfit-p-t-hn the “Sun-disc is found,” displayed on its walls sculptured scenes depicting almost exclusively the jubilee or sd-festival, and it is virtually certain that it was here that this great festival was celebrated in the second or third year of the king’s reign. Why he should have celebrated the jubilee so early in his reign (the 38th regnal year was the norm) is a mystery; but the lavish relief decoration of this temple has provided us with perhaps the best graphic description of the elaborate rites comprising the sd.

The first half decade of the reign was crucial for the inception of the new program and the experimentation which resulted in the final form to be taken by the new cult. One might expect to find texts of public royal speeches (which abound in other reigns) telling why the king did what he did. In fact, heretofore such inscriptions have been wholly absent from Thebes, so thorough was the destruction wrought by Akhenaten’s enemies. But the Project has now brought to light several fragments of hieroglyphic inscriptions which, in fact, have proved to be parts of just such royal monologues delivered to the court, informing of and rationalizing the monarch’s intended activity. One block, uncovered within the core of the 10th pylon as part of the filling, describes the king’s new sun-god and his attributes, as well as the shortcomings of the deities he is about to replace. These fragments prove that such inscriptions do exist, and further examination of the 10th pylon ought to produce a good many additional fragments.

Up until 1979 the Project was confined to the matching of talatat in photographic reduction, without reference to site, ground plans or other remains in situ. In fact the sites of these buildings had long since been lost, and although the talatat numbers mounted into the tens of thousands, no known site could be pointed out for any of the shrines. True, in 1925 a

Winter 1979

drainage canal dug around the Karnak site had by accident revealed a line of fallen colossal statues running east-west along the central Karnak axis, east of the main Amun temple. But the precise significance of the colonnai and the nature of the building they decorated were by no means certain.

It had been from the start the hope of the Project to initiate excavation at Karnak to complement, as it were, the reconstruction of wall reliefs. After unavoidable delays, caused partly by the October war of 1973, a concession was secured from the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation to excavate a wide tract of land east of the main temple of Amun at Karnak; and in April 1975 a survey team spent four weeks at the site producing a contour map. Successive campaigns in the summer of 1975, the winter and summer of 1976, 1977 and 1978 have laid bare a sizable area and have produced results more gratifying than could have been foreseen at the outset. The area chosen for excavation was the site of Chervrier’s discovery of the colossal statues, the only site in Karnak known to have produced in situ Akhenaten material. By January 1976 excavation had detected the south colonnade of a large temple, and a lucky find revealed its identity to be none other than the Gerfit-p-t-hn. The summer of 1977 saw the south wall and colonnade exposed as far as the southwest corner, and the summer campaign of 1978 commenced the excavation of the western side. Although the destruction of the temple had been thorough, the wreckers had left a
Expedition

Mainly responsible for this systematic
anarchomatization was a former
Horenhab (ca. 1350-1320 B.C.), a former
lieutenant-general in the armed forces,
who was not related to the former royal
Yahwet. Any
doubt that it was, in fact, Horenhab
that
affected the destruction of the Gm-p2-in
at least was dispelled this year by a chance
to
find among the debris along the west
side
of the colonnaded court. Here, under a pile

of
fractured masonry, was discovered a small
bone applique with the cartouche of the
pharaoh, probably from some wan
of
office borne by one of the supervisors of
wrecking crews. To us in the excavation it
was tantamount to a signature, marking the
end of this glorious, zany and ill-conceived
experiment by a spiritual maverick.

of the Greeks (late 4th century B.C.).
The sector was then abandoned and
became the dump which it remains today.
All these
periods must be carefully
investigated
from a variety of different points
(Egyptological, historical, anthropological,
ecological etc.), and the Project has now
graduated from a purely archaeological
treatment to a full-scaled modern
archaeological expedition, for the area
Grants as a concession to approximately one-third of the ancient
Thebes, specifically the more domestic
section of the city. Of this the Akhenaten
Temple was but a small part. Two other
standing temples occupy the site along
with other shrines now buried, a mud-
brick pyramid of uncertain date, and streets
of houses, shops and industrial buildings,
all awaiting excavation. In the latter alone
lies the hope of elucidating how this once
great ancient capital functioned, how its
citizens lived, what they ate and drank,
what their occupations were, how they laid
out their streets and houses. Whereas once
the Project was made up of Egyptologists
and artists only, our staff now shows a
wide range of experts, including pedolo-
gists, osteologists, specialists in archeo-
metrics, engineers, draftsmen, stratigraphers,
ceramic experts.

if the Project has indeed shed some new
light on the reign of history's first mono-
theist, there remain many unknowns. We
still know little of the king's motivation,
and even the family relationships of the
dramatic personae of the period are
obscure. As for the Gm-p2-in temple, we
can be sure only of its site and the pres-
ence within it of a colonnaded court. To
date, the north wall of this court has been
detected by magnetometer, but not dug,
while the eastern end lies beneath the
modern village and is probably forever
inaccessible. The relief scenes of the
temple suggest that a palace stood not far
away, but again no such structure has yet
appeared in the excavations. The sites of
the remaining temples continue to defy
investigation, although it is becoming
increasingly clear that they all lay within
the environs of Karnak. (Years ago an
Akhenaten temple was postulated for the
Lukor area, mainly because of the large
total number of talatat retrieved from the Lukor
temple; but it is certain that it was
Rameses II that was responsible for taking
them there).

Our uncertainty stems, of course,
largely from the violence of the situation which
overtook Akhenaten's program, its monu-
ments and buildings, after his death.