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A Good Old Age



Esna Restored



Nubian Treasures

Takabuti: New Revelations



RESTORATION AT ESNA TEMPLE: THE RECOVERY OF THE POLYCHROME DECORATION

Hisham el-Leithy, Christian Leitz, and Daniel von Recklinghausen reveal the stunning newly restored reliefs at this fascinating Graeco-Roman temple.



ABOVE: The frieze on the upper part on column no. 7 after conservation. The cartouche of Emperor Hadrian (AD 117–138) is accompanied and protected by Khnum, Lord of Esna (left), and the falcon Behedety (right).

The temple of Esna – located in Upper Egypt, approximately 60 km south of Luxor – is one of the most important examples of Egyptian temple architecture from the Graeco-Roman Period still visible today. The only surviving part of the temple, the *pronaos* or hypostyle hall, was completed in the first century AD (presumably during the reign of Tiberius, AD 14–37, or somewhat later), with the decoration work continuing until the reign of Trajan Decius (AD 249–251). The temple is famous for its decoration and in particular its hieroglyphic inscriptions. The principal deities are the ram god Khnum and the goddess Neith. They both represent a demiurgical aspect – Khnum shapes all living beings on a potter’s wheel, whereas Neith sets creation into being by a mere utterance of her thoughts.

The decoration consists of offering scenes on the walls, with depictions of the Roman emperors in front of the local pantheon, as well as lengthy inscriptions on the columns and astronomical features on the ceiling. The hieroglyphic inscriptions provide us with unique information about local religious life and theology in the Roman Period. In their entirety, these texts form the latest significant corpus of hieroglyphic inscriptions known today. They show a highly sophisticated and complex local style of hieroglyphic writing.

Pronaos

The measurements of the Roman *pronaos* far exceed the original Ptolemaic temple building. The roof rests on 24 columns, of which 18 are freestanding. When compared



ABOVE
The façade of the pronaos of Esna.

BELOW
A plan diagram of the Esna pronaos showing the arrangement of the 18 free-standing columns. Arranged in three rows of six, the columns are topped by architraves running east-west (vertically in the plan). Six further columns form the façade of the pronaos (bottom of diagram).

with other contemporary temples, the columns' decoration pattern is extraordinary as they are largely covered by inscriptions. The texts describe the local festivals in lengthy detail, as well as presenting hymns and litanies in praise of the local pantheon. Even the layout of the capitals is unique since every capital has a different design. The freestanding columns are arranged in 3 rows (3x6, north to south – see below); six architraves, oriented in an east-west direction, each connect three columns with the walls of the pronaos in order to support the heavy roof. These six architraves partition the ceiling into seven zones.

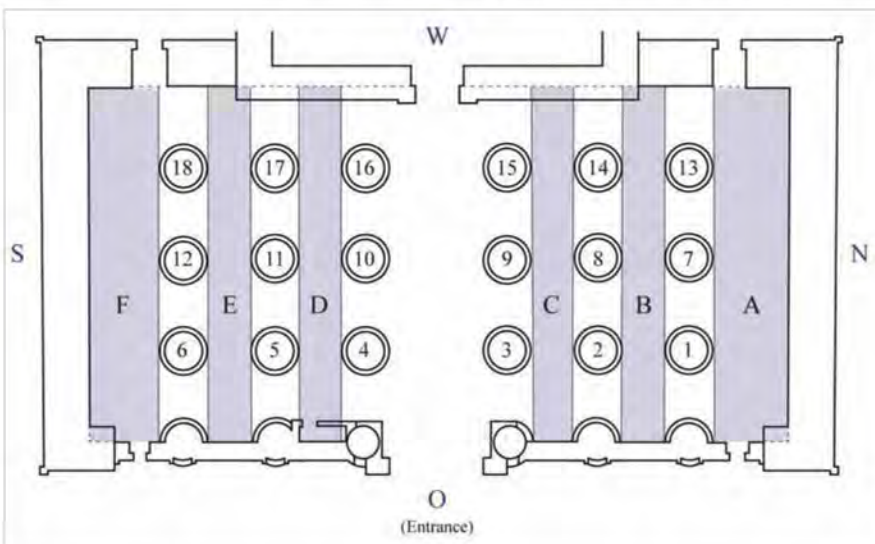
The Temple at Esna (above) is located in the city centre and is some 10m below today's surface level. The temple escaped demolition in the nineteenth century (the fate of many other

pharaonic sanctuaries) for the mere reason that it was considered an appropriate storage facility for cotton during the reign of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805–1848). Although the temple was partly cleared of sand and debris, large parts of the building remained buried. In the early days of Egyptology, the pronaos was quite famous among scholars and travellers. However, the temple did not move into the focus of scientific research until the French Egyptologist Serge Sauneron (1927–1976) realized the wealth of the temple's decoration. In the 1950s, he cleaned the exterior south wall, which had been partly buried even then. In the following years he meticulously edited all inscriptions (with the last text volume published posthumously in 2009). After his untimely death in a car accident, work at Esna came to a halt for a long time.

A New Project

One aspect of the decoration, however, has been largely neglected until now: the original colouring, which is still intact in large areas of the pronaos. This is quite understandable, as the polychrome colouration had been covered by dust, soot, and animal excrements and thus remained undetected.

In order to recover the colouration, and to guarantee its preservation for future generations, a joint project for the conservation, documentation, and research of the polychrome decoration was launched by the Egyptian Ministry





LEFT: Revealing the colours of a hieroglyphic inscription on column no. 7.

ABOVE: Restoration work in progress on column no. 2.

BELOW: Esna Temple's pronaos (hypostyle hall) with scaffolding for the restoration work. Note the variety in the capitals, with different designs used for adjacent columns.





ABOVE and BELOW
The cartouche of Emperor Trajan (AD 98-117) on the northern side of the abacus of column no. 1 before (above) and after (below) conservation treatment.

of Antiquities (now Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities) and the Egyptological Institute of the University of Tübingen in 2018. Previously, in the 2000s, the Ministry cleaned some of the western interior wall, and the new project offered the opportunity to resume work on a large scale and with an enlarged focus.

The most important work is the restoration of the ancient colours. In the 2018-2020 seasons, a team of local conservators, led by chief conservator Ahmed Emam, achieved very promising results. In the northern part of the pronaos interior, the original colour on parts of the ceiling, walls and columns was once again revealed (*see p. 15*). Before the conservators could commence their difficult task, it was necessary to analyse the current state and

search for appropriate conservation methods. It turned out that several external parameters could potentially cause severe damage to the antique decoration, and it was imperative to develop a treatment strategy that diminished their impact on the wall structure and the decoration alike. A major concern was the relatively high humidity level, which results in the movement of salt from inside the stone blocks towards the outer layers, causing efflorescence to accumulate on the inscribed surfaces. These salt crystals may cause chipping of the inscribed surfaces as well as fading of the colours of the painted reliefs. A considerable layer of soot covers most parts of the decorated surface – perhaps as result of activities when the pronaos was used as a storage room. The soot caused noticeable fading of the blue and green paint, especially in the ceiling zones. Dust accumulation and bird excrements are visible all over the temple walls, causing further discolouration of painted areas and staining large areas.

Once a section of the decoration is recovered and conserved, photographic documentation follows as soon as possible. The photos show scenes where the decoration has been restored, as well as parts which have yet to be processed (*see above and below*), clearly demonstrating the effectiveness of the conservators' efforts. Post-processing work on the decoration based on the photographic material is conducted at the University





ABOVE: A new inscription, until recently covered with soot, has been discovered on the lower surface of architrave A in the blackened space between columns no. 7 and 13.



ABOVE: After the cleaning process, the new inscription was revealed. The photograph here is shown on its side so that the text can be read more easily.

in Tübingen, and includes an analysis of the impact of the colouration within the ancient decorative scheme. At this point, with only a small part of the decoration revealed, it is apparent that a study of the colouration offers a rare and innovative approach to research into Graeco-Roman Period temple decoration: the combined material analysis of figures and texts in relief and (now) in paint, as well as the textual evidence, shows they all formed part of one integral decoration pattern.

Thanks to the efforts of the conservators in the seasons of 2018 to 2020 (working even during the time of the Covid19-pandemic), a large part of the ceiling as well as the columns have now been restored to something that is very close to their original state – that of polychrome temple decoration. The richness of the once vivid colourful decoration can be seen in the photographic examples shown in this article.

New Inscriptions

In addition to the reconstruction of the polychrome decoration, a huge number of hitherto unknown inscriptions have been brought to light. These inscriptions are only inked or painted onto the surface, not carved. Because they were also covered with soot and dust, no one knew they existed before the cleaning process. All the ‘hidden’

texts are located in the ceiling zone and date to a rather late period of the overall decoration (c. end of the second century AD). So far, these inscriptions seem to be limited to three contexts:

1. Captions of constellations and celestial phenomena in the ceiling zones
2. The incorporation of royal names and titles (in cartouches) into already existing inscriptions in relief
3. Complete texts on the bottom faces of the architraves.

While the captions in the ceiling zones are executed only in red ink (and in a somewhat clumsy manner), the other decorations show an elaborate and polychrome style. This is especially true for the lower faces of the architraves (the zone in between two columns) as seen in the image above. What was once a black layer of soot (*top left*) turned out to be an inscription of two separate texts in four columns, praising Khnum and Neith (*top right*). The signs are painted accurately and vividly and seemingly show a deliberate choice of colour for certain hieroglyphs.

A rather peculiar case is that of the passages left blank in the lateral inscriptions of the architraves. Sauneron used the term “uncarved” for those passages – still technically correct, but now we know that there is text present.



LEFT

The hitherto unknown cartouche containing the titles 'Autokrator' and 'Kaisaros', often used for Roman emperors, executed in paint while the remainder of the inscription of the northern part of architrave B was executed in relief.

These 'blanks' are attested fairly often in Sauneron's published architrave texts and, for the most part, they show up towards the end of a text passage. So far, many cartouches have come to light in these previously blank zones (*left*) and one is tempted to hypothesize that these cartouches were painted after the relief inscriptions had already been carved.

The Ceiling

A rather special area is the astronomical ceiling. Apart from the astronomical ceiling in the Temple of Dendera, this is the only completely preserved example from the Graeco-Roman Period. The pronaos of both temples contain six ceiling fields with astronomical content, three on each side (adjacent to the central ceiling over the main axis of the temple). They offer unique compositions which in parts differ considerably from each other. The conservators have so far finished the first two ceiling zones in the northern part of the Esna pronaos (called *Travée A* and *B* following Sauneron's designations).

The main subject of *Travée A* is the lunar cycle, which is depicted by the deities of the waxing and the waning moon (*see left*) shown in two rows. Each group consists of 14 deities standing above a disk. Inside every disk is a depiction of the *wadjet*-eye, a common symbol of the moon. The *wadjet*-eyes were only painted onto the surface; after conservation, they were much more visible than in the time of Sauneron, who could only make out faint traces. The row on the southern part of the ceiling shows the deities of the waxing moon. The first disk in the west remained void of any decoration, representing the first lunar day on which the moon is still invisible. The second disk already shows the crescent moon in the western part which reflects the conditions of the real world.



RIGHT

Osiris and Isis as representations of the waxing moon. Osiris is standing on the moon of the 7th lunar day, Isis on the moon of the 8th lunar day; *Travée A*, southern register.



On the second lunar day the crescent can be observed shortly after sunset in the west in about 70% of all lunar months; during the other months one has to wait a day longer, until the third lunar day, to observe the first lunar crescent. Every following day a little bit more of the moon becomes visible and, therefore, the *wadjet*-eye on the disk becomes more and more complete. In the case of Osiris, who represents the seventh lunar day, half of the moon can already be seen and, consequently, half of the *wadjet*-eye is painted in (*see opposite, bottom*). In the northern part of the ceiling the direction is reversed. It starts with the complete *wadjet*-eye on the disk on the 16th lunar day, progressing westwards to the 29th lunar day – the final visible phase of the moon.

Apart from the lunar cycle this *travée* shows several constellations and

at the very end, in the east, one of the 'Four Winds', which the Egyptians imagined as animal-shaped. In our case (*above left*) it is a scarab with four wings, a ram head and an ostrich feather. A painted inscription, now decipherable, is located next to its head: "*The Beautiful Wind of the East*". Why all of the inscriptions of this *travée* were not carved is not – for the moment – evident.

In the south-eastern corner of *Travée A*, a cobra sitting on a papyrus-thicket is shown in relief (*above right*). In front of the cobra's head is another hitherto unknown painted inscription, which reads in translation "*The Great Flame*". This is a designation of the cobra goddess Wadjet who is representative of the North, and a manifestation of the Lower Egyptian crown in Egyptian religion. At first,



TOP LEFT: One of the four wind gods with his name in front of his head, recently uncovered; *Travée A*, east corner.

TOP RIGHT: A cobra on papyrus plants with an inked inscription in front of its head; *Travée A*, south-east corner.

RIGHT: The constellation Orion as Osiris looking back at Isis. Although she is wearing the headdress of Seshat she represents Sothis (Sirius); *Travée B*, southern register.



ABOVE
Decans no. 30 in the form of a mummy on bier (above) with seven stars and no. 31 in the form of two wadjet-eyes in a barque (below) with 14 stars; Travée B, northern register.

this symbolism is not in accordance with the actual position of the cobra in the southern part of this *travée*. The connection only becomes clear and logical by taking into account the entirety of the ceiling where *Travée A* is the northernmost, and thus a perfect position for the crown goddess of Lower Egypt.

Advancing to *Travée B*, which was restored mostly in 2020, the main subjects are the 36 decans. Decans were stars or, in most cases, constellations (marked as such by their accompanying stars). Their purpose was to indicate the twelve hours of the night by their position, which changes from day to day. Here the decans are depicted each in their own barque (apparently one decan was omitted as there are only 35 figures and barques). In one exceptional case, two barques are represented one above the other, made possible due to the unusual iconography of that decan as a mummy lying on a bier (see above).

At the eastern end of the *travée* are two constellations. The first one in the southern half is Orion, a manifestation

of Osiris and a constellation of the southern hemisphere. In some texts the Egyptian designation of Orion (*Sah*) is also an equivalent of the south. He is looking over his shoulder at his consort Isis (see previous page, bottom) who is – in the astral world – a manifestation of Sirius (Sothis), the brightest star of the sky. Isis-Sothis always rises later than Orion-*Sah*, but she follows him along approximately the same path. His heliacal rising precedes hers by about 22 days and his daily rising is about one and a half hours earlier than her appearance – thus he is depicted as turning to look at her.

The second constellation in the northern half is the Big Dipper (aka The Plough – *opposite, top*) represented as a bull's foreleg. Its Egyptian designation *Mesekhtyw* is equated with the north in some texts of the Late Period. The leg is shackled and the chain held by a hippopotamus goddess ('The Great') in order to prevent it from descending into the netherworld. It is the manifestation of Seth, the murderer of his brother

Osiris. In the sky, Seth can never reach Osiris in his form of Orion, but as a circumpolar constellation he is able to delve below the horizon a little bit, at least in a place as far south as Esna in Upper Egypt. Nonetheless the chain prevents him from descending any further in order to harm Osiris, the Lord of the Netherworld. The layout of these two constellations on the ceiling marks the south (Orion) and the north (Big Dipper) each in their geographically correct position.

Future Prospects

It is evident, by looking at even these few examples, that the pronaos of Esna contains a wealth of polychrome decoration. Now this beautiful, accurate, and vivid decoration can be studied in combination with the temple's architectural layout, something that has not, and could not have been, attempted until recently. But the work carried out by the conservators also brings to light new inscriptions and, thus, insights into the local theology during one of the last phases of Pharaonic civilisation. There remains much to do and we are looking forward to future results.

Hisham el-Leithy, Christian Leitz, and Daniel von Recklinghausen

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All photos were taken by Ahmed Amin and Ahmed Emam and are © Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

TOP: The Big Dipper as a bull's leg surrounded by seven stars. Using a chain, a goddess in the form of a hippopotamus prevents him from entering the netherworld; *Travée B*, northern register.

RIGHT: The conservation team in action.

