

# The ancient colours of Esna return

The temple itself vanished in medieval times, but its surviving *pronaos* is still a beautiful and much-visited specimen of late Egyptian architecture. **Hisham el-Leithy, Christian Leitz, and Daniel von Recklinghausen** report on recent conservation work done at the structure that has revealed decorations hitherto invisible.

The *pronaos* of Esna, one of the last examples of ancient Egyptian temple architecture, was decorated mainly during the Roman period (1st to 3rd century AD). It is, in fact, only the front part of the original temple complex, which – unlike the (Ptolemaic) temple proper – survived because it was used as storage facility for cotton during the nineteenth century (image below). The extant walls and columns are famous for their complex hieroglyphs as well as for the topics of the scenes and iconography. Serge Sauneron published the texts of the Esna temple between 1963 and 1975 (with the final volume realised posthumously only in 2009).

In 2018, the University of Tübingen, in co-operation with the Egyptian Ministry of

Antiquities (MoA), launched a project to document the temple decoration. Its main objectives are twofold: first, it aims to continue the cleaning and conservation work started by the Department of Conservation (MoA) under the auspices of Gharib Sonbol some years ago. At the moment, this work focuses on the inscriptions and images of the ceiling, the columns as well as the upper registers of the lateral wall of the northern section of the temple. These activities are carried out by a team of Egyptian conservators led by Ahmed Imam. The results of the first campaign (autumn 2018 to spring 2019) have been highly promising, as the complete and original colouration is now visible again in many parts.

The temple of Esna in March 2019.

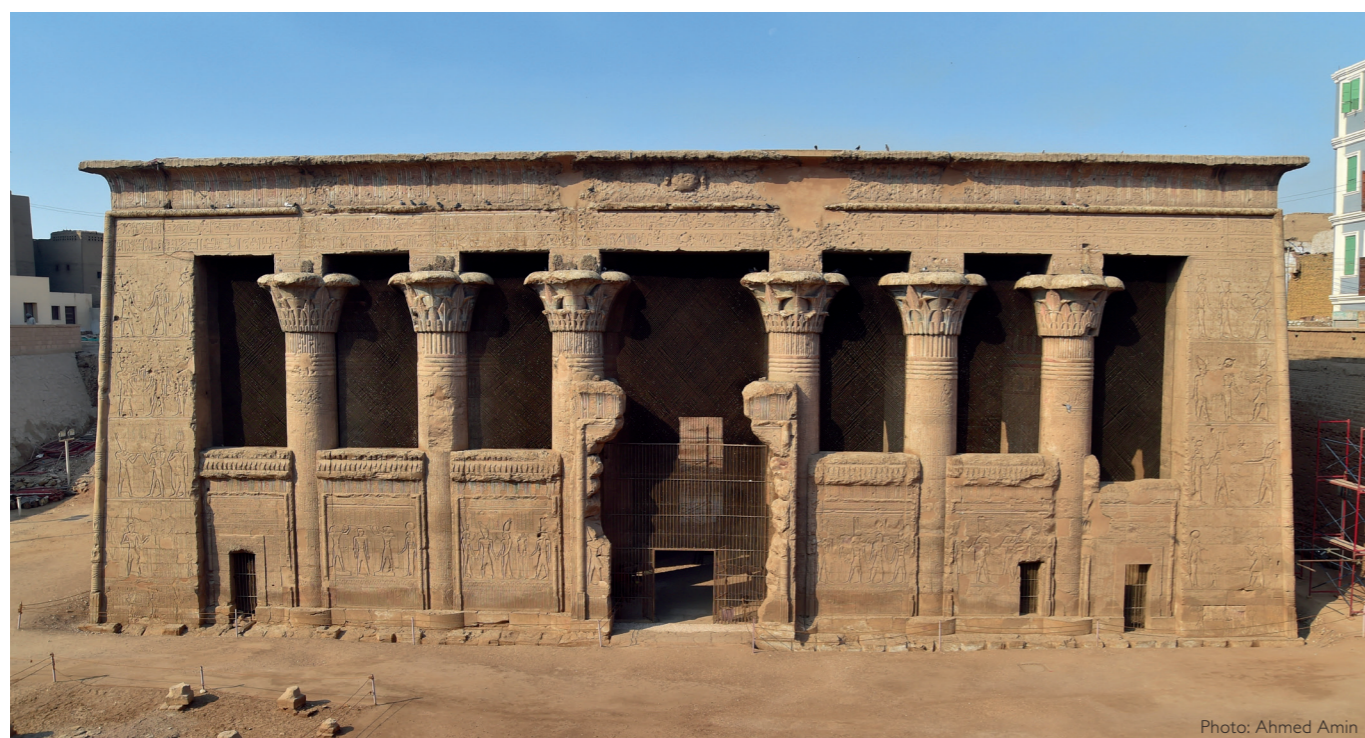


Photo: Ahmed Amin



Ceiling ('Travée A'), moon phases, detail.

Photos: Ahmed Amin

Since these results offer a completely new approach to the temple decoration, the second objective of the project is a full photographic documentation of the current state of preservation, undertaken in co-operation with the Documentation Center (MoA), represented at the site by Mohamed Saad. In the long term, we intend to publish plate volumes of the entire decoration of the *pronaos* in order to set them next to the text volumes of the temple inscriptions so meticulously edited by Sauneron and thus to complete the publication of this famous temple.

In the following, we want to provide an insight into some of the most remarkable results of this first campaign. Recent conservation work began at the western part of the northern row of the ceiling decoration (Sauneron's 'Travée A'), much of which is taken up by the representation of the lunar phases (image above). Thanks to the cleaning efforts, the different phases of the completion of the *wedjat*-eye (indicating the different phases of the moon) can now be clearly distinguished. Apart from the moon, the solar bark and some constellations are also now visible in Travée A (image above right). In Sauneron's publication, these images are not accompanied by inscriptions. It was therefore quite a surprise to find nearly every figure followed by a short caption. Executed not in relief but only in paint, they were not visible to Sauneron and hence not incorporated into his publications.

Turning to the columns, the cleaning and conservation of the northern columns has steadily progressed in recent months. Of



Ceiling ('Travée A'), constellations, detail.

particular interest is the capital of the 'mid-northern' column (Sauneron's 'Column 7'). It represents a kind of orchard – a rare type of a column capital – apparently composed of a combination of grapevines and date palms (with a large quantity of dates hanging from the trees). Subtly intertwining, both plants are depicted with great accuracy. The capital is a good example from which to glean information on the colour system of the temple decoration: opaque red and yellow visually dominate, offset by the palms, painted green, and the grapes in blue (image next page, top left).

Beneath the capital of Sauneron's 'Column 1' runs a frieze of alternating cartouches and winged scarabs (images next page, top centre and right). Again, the execution of the decoration is extremely detailed and accurate. Here, the dung beetle appears as a representation of the morning sun. At the same time, it can also be understood emblematically and be read as 'live like Ra', as is clearly suggested by the hieroglyphs. In





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connection with the cartouches it can be read 'May NN live like Ra'. The names given in the cartouches alternate between those of Khnum-Ra, Lord of Esna, Neith, Lady of Esna, the child-god Heka, and the emperor Trajan.

Conservation also made significant progress along the inner wall decoration. In the 4th (top) register of the northern part of the west wall, the goddess Neith is depicted in an offering scene (image opposite page). The recovered painting reveals many features that emphasise the character of the goddess. First, the goddess's red dress is covered by a bead net made of blue and green beads set in a rhombi pattern (this interpretation is supported by yellow round beads between the rhombi). In this case however, the horizontal aspect is clearly accentuated as the blue and the green beads respectively form a zig-zag pattern, each in the shape of a waveline (with the phonetic value 'n'). This is a 'graphic pun' referring to the name of Neith but perhaps also to the Primeval Water (Nun), in which Neith – in her manifestation as the cow Mehet-weret ('the Great Flood') – sets creation in motion. Furthermore, the pedestal of her throne is decorated with nine bow-and-arrow-pairs, attributes of the goddess (also shown in her left hand). At the same time, this also clearly refers to the concept of 'stamping down the Nine Bows', a traditional reference to the enemies of Egypt, a motif taken up again in the emblematic depiction on the throne. Here,

Top left: Column 7. The decoration of the capital is composed of depictions of date palms and grapevines.

Top centre: Column 1. Upper frieze, detail.

Top right: Column 1. Detail of the text columns facing west.

Right: the emperor Trajan offering a crown. Inner northern wall, 4th register.

Opposite page: the goddess Neith in an offering scene. Northern part of the inner western wall, 4th register.



two enemies – one a man from the Levant, the other a Nubian – are bound at a stake. The depiction observes geographic directions, as the Nubian is looking south, the man from the Levant north.

Next to this offering scene, in the 4th register of the northern wall, Khnum-Ra, Lord of Esna, receives a crown offering together with his consort Menhit. Here, the colouration of the pharaoh (image left) – the emperor Trajan offering – is extremely well preserved, retaining even such details of crown and kilt that were only painted, rather than carved.

This short overview presents some initial results of the exciting new work taking place at Esna temple, demonstrating its potential in future years.

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