

The New Zodiac over Esna

Hisham El-Leithy, Christian Leitz, and Daniel von Recklinghausen report on the latest conservation work applied to the Temple of Esna in spring 2023. Their work has revealed some of the best representations of the Egyptian zodiac seen in the archaeological record.

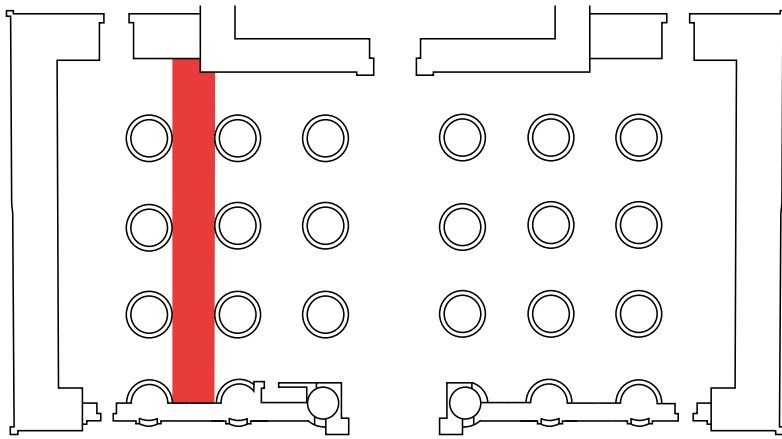
The temple of Esna is located on the west bank of the Nile approximately 34 miles south of Luxor. Its construction and decoration began in the Ptolemaic Period and continued well into the Roman Period. The temple is one of the six major surviving examples from the Graeco-Roman Period (ca. 332 BCE–350 CE), the others being Philae, Kom Ombo, Edfu, Dendera, and Athribis. The inscriptions of the *pronaos* (or portico in front of the temple), the only extant part of the building, were published by Serge Sauneron, the then director of the French Archaeological Institute in Cairo (IFAO),

in his series *Esna* as volumes II–IV and VI between 1963 and 1975 (with volume VII published posthumously in 2009).

Five years ago, the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MoTA), in co-operation with the University of Tübingen, started an extensive conservation project with the aim to remove the soot and dirt covering the walls, columns, and ceiling, as a result of over 1,500 years of use by the local population after the temple had lost its religious significance. All conservation activities are carried out by a team of up to 30 Egyptian

The capital of column 5 (after conservation) below the eastern part of Bays E (left) and D (right) (both before conservation).





as limited signs were recognisable until spring 2023. In its entirety Bay E, with a length of approximately 17 m and a width of about 3 m, depicts a rich astronomical decoration, with a Zodiac as one of its central elements. It features around 80

Plan of the ceiling of the *pronaos* at Esna, depicting Bay E in red.

conservators led by the chief conservator Ahmed Emam (MoTA). This work was previously reported on by the authors in *Egyptian Archaeology* 55. Twice a year, the authors of this article, together with Mohamed Saad (MoTA), revisit Esna for detailed photographic documentation of the new results with Ahmed Amin (MoTA) as the photographer. In addition to the conservation work, we intend to publish five volumes to supplement the previous series edited by Sauneron. These will contain comprehensive photographic documentation of the reliefs and inscriptions after conservation, as well as corrections and new inscriptions, which were not visible before the cleaning process.

different symbols including: zodiac constellations, *decans*, the three planets Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, six of the Seven Arrows, as well as other mythological figures. As a border for the register, in the eastern and western rear parts of Bay E, two figures of the sky goddess Nut can be seen. Deviating from the *pronaos* in Dendara, where Nut is seen giving birth to the sun god in the east and swallowing the sun in the west, here in Esna Nut is found swallowing the sun in both directions. This might be a simple mistake or due to the lack of space.

The sky goddess Nut swallowing the evening sun. Before her two baboons, partly representing the Fourth Arrow.

The Egyptian Zodiac at Esna

The ceiling of the *pronaos* at Esna is divided into seven decorative zones or bays, labelled “travée” [A–F and central] by Sauneron. North and south of the central bay, there are three compartments on each side with astronomical patterns. The conservation work started with Bay A in the north and continued systematically to the south. In general, a thick layer of soot was observed across the ceilings. This is a result of later times, because the temple was used as a store for cotton, weapons, and ammunition during the era of Muhammad Ali Pasha (c. 1805–1849 CE).

Bays A–E have now been conserved, with Bay E being the most spectacular so far with regard to its iconographic details and colouration. Like every compartment, with the exception of Bay F, it is divided into a southern and a northern part separated by a line of hieroglyphic inscription. As the text on Bay E was only painted and not carved, it remained unpublished and largely neglected





Above left: The constellation of Capricorn, depicted as a sea goat. The planet Mars is depicted as a deity holding weaponry.



Above right: The constellations of Leo, depicted as a lion, and Cancer (only partly shown) shown above the planet Jupiter, depicted as a deity holding weapons.

Below left: The constellation of Pisces, depicted as two fish connected by a line between their mouths.

Below right: A group of *decans* before the sky goddess Nut in the west. These are *decans* 25–27 of a *decan* list dating from Seti I (c. 1323–1279 BCE) with a pseudo-*decan* in the second position. Only the snake has a painted name, which is here “the raised spirits”, but other attestations of his name would be “the two spirits”.

From a modern perspective, the most important representations might be the 12 zodiac signs. They originated from Babylonia but were likely assimilated into Egyptian culture during the rule of the Ptolemies (c. 332–30 BCE). In Roman times, the zodiac signs played an essential part in Egyptian astronomy and were depicted on sarcophagi, as well as in tombs and temples. Unfortunately, most of those zodiacs are destroyed today, and until now, the most famous and beautiful representations were those from the *pronaos* of Dendera. After conservation, however, the zodiac figures in Esna equal these representations in all aspects. While the dominant colours in Dendera are blue and white, in Esna, yellow and red are much more prevalent.

As previously mentioned, three of the five planets known in antiquity are depicted in Esna: Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. They are standing in their exaltations (*hypsomata*), an astrological concept, which combines the seven ancient planets: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the sun, and the moon, with the 12 zodiac signs. Each planet is assigned to two zodiac signs, while the sun and the moon are connected with just one sign, as ancient astrologists believed that the planets had the biggest influence. This concept must be distinguished from astrological horoscopes, which are dated to the birth of a person according to the positions of the planets within the zodiac on that day. The planet Mars was believed to have his exaltation in Capricorn, so it is for this reason that the deity representing the planet is standing on the back of the sea goat, a mythical creature with the body of a goat and the tail of a fish. He is represented as a war god, holding a bow, two arrows and a short lance in his hands. On his head, he bears an unusual headdress, perhaps a helmet. The representation of Jupiter is similar, but without headdress and instead of a lance he raises a long knife. His exaltation was in Cancer; right of Leo, but due to the many stars over Cancer in Bay E, his position was moved slightly to the



left. The woman standing behind the tail of the lion might represent several stars of the constellation Virgo, perhaps including Spica, the brightest star of this constellation. The two fishes (Pisces) are connected by a string at their mouths, which is in contrast to descriptions in astronomical texts, like Ptolemy's *Almagest*, where a line connects the tails of the two fishes instead.

Another important deity group in relation to the zodiac are the *decans* (in total 17 *decans* and 6 pseudo-*decans*). The *decans* were constellations that functioned for the ancient Egyptians as a star clock measuring the hours of the night. When a *decan* culminated in the south it marked the beginning of a new hour. The *decans* were known in Egypt from the Middle Kingdom (c. 2055–1650 BCE) onwards. Only eight hours of 60 minutes each (or twelve hours of 40 minutes each) could be measured with this kind of device, (which caused problems especially in winter with 14 night hours of 60 minutes each). However, the system still remained in use 2,000 years later in Roman times.

The Seven Arrows were potentially dangerous messengers of several goddesses: one arrow can consist of just one deity, but sometimes an arrow is formed by up to four entities. In the *pronaos* of Esna, six of the Seven Arrows are depicted. A complete set existed in the temple at 'Esna north', which has since been destroyed. During the conservation work, painted ink inscriptions giving their names came to light, but, surprisingly, not all of them contain the correct name. This is especially the case with the *decans* who are easily recognisable by their iconography which appear also in other temples (e.g. Dendera). For example, one figure of a lion-headed goddess on a throne should be *decan* number 16 with the name "the one, who is in the bark", but the rectangle contains a so far unattested name which might be translated as "the complete one of the fathers".

Apart from the planets, constellations, and Seven Arrows, many other mythological figures are represented in Bay E, whose exact meanings were unclear until now. Most of them once possessed parallels in the decoration of the temple at 'Esna north'. However, some differences, including their appearance in different parts of the sky, contradicts their identification with specific stars or particular constellations. Be that as it may, many



representations are accompanied by inked inscriptions, which only came to light after conservation in spring 2023. For this reason, we now know their designations. One example is a double lion with two heads of a crocodile named "the one who is in the water; the lord of the field", or perhaps "the lord of the field, the one who is in the water" because the inscriptions of the ceiling bays are sometimes written in retrograde. In any case, the name of this deity was hitherto unknown.

In conclusion, the conservation work of spring 2023 at the temple of Esna has revealed some of the best and most colourful representations of the zodiac signs currently known in ancient Egypt. The hope to find painted hieroglyphic names of the zodiac signs was almost forsaken, as in all other monumental representations of the zodiac the names of the constellations were never written. However, 36 of the 77 figures of this bay were accompanied by painted inscriptions, which have revealed their names for the first time. Since

The Second Arrow with the name "who steals the heart (not written correctly), who loves one" in painted ink.

The constellation of Libra, depicted as a woman holding a set of scales.



One of the mythological figures: a double lion with two crocodile heads, named “the one who is in the water, the lord of the field”.

several are unique representations not attested elsewhere in Egypt, this can be considered a major success. At the time of publication, six out of seven Bays and 13 out of 18 columns, or a total of 24 columns when including the six columns of the façade, are very closely restored to their original glory. The authors look forward to reporting the completion of the conservation work in Esna in the not-too-distant future.

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