

The Wall Paintings from the Temple of Amenhotep III at Wadi es-Sebua: Investigation, Preservation, and Documentation

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Introduction

In November 2008 I was able to locate substantial parts of the wall paintings from the temple of Amenhotep III at Wadi es-Sebua in northern Nubia about 150 km south of Aswan in the basement of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The removal of these paintings in 1964 – shortly before the building was submerged by the rising waters of the Lake Nasser – had never been brought to the attention of the public and thus the knowledge of it had got increasingly lost and the actual whereabouts of these paintings were unknown. Like the temple in general the remains of its wall decoration have never been properly documented and published till now.

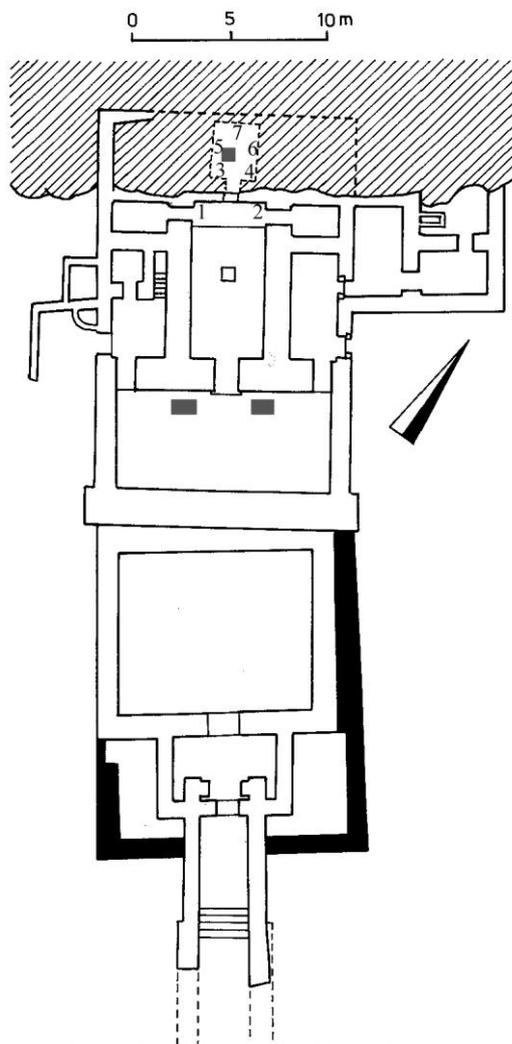


Fig. 1: Plan of the temple of Amenhotep III at Wadi es-Sebua.

(Based upon I. Hein, *Die Ramessidische Bautätigkeit in Nubien*, Göttinger Orientforschungen, IV. Reihe: Ägypten 22, ed. by F. Junge and W. Westendorf (Wiesbaden, 1991), pl. 7).

In 2010 ARCE awarded me a grant from the Antiquities Endowment Fund for a first preliminary campaign of a project which aims at the scholarly examination, conservation, and publication of these paintings and their display and presentation to the public. The project will for the first time shed light on the art historical, religious, and historical interpretation of these rare and almost unknown pieces of Eighteenth Dynasty temple decoration.

The special importance of the project lies in the unique character of these paintings from Wadi es-Sebua:

- They are the only substantial remains of a cult building from the reign of Amenhotep III in northern Nubia and they considerably enlarge the corpus of painted temple decoration from this period.
- The paintings show numerous alterations which bear witness to several phases of reworking probably in the later reign of Amenhotep III as well as in the time of Akhenaten and again after the Amarna period, probably during the reign of Ramesses II. The investigation of the different layers during the conservation process will provide important new insights into the changing religious background of this time and its meaning for the temple cult.

The temple of Amenhotep III at Wadi es-Sebua

The temple of Amenhotep III was situated about 200 m to the south of the well known Ramesses II temple and like the latter it was oriented towards the river.¹ Amenhotep III is recorded in its wall decoration as the king responsible for its erection.

After alterations which were probably executed in the later reign of this king and damages in the Amarna period, activity is attested again in the temple only during the reign of Ramesses

II. But it can not be excluded that restoration work in the building started already at an earlier date, i.e. at the earliest under Tutankhamun.

The structure consisted of a small rock-cut sanctuary in the west with several rooms mainly build up from mud-bricks in the front part to the east (see the temple plan in fig. 1 and pl. I).



Pl. I: Temple of Amenhotep III at Wadi es-Sebua, CEDAE photo no. 13886 (courtesy of the SCA)

Behind two courtyards the inner temple area began with an elongated hall, about 4 to 8 m large, surmounted by mud-brick vaulting. Based upon its position and its equipment, I assume that this main hall of the building functioned as a mixture of festival court and hall of appearance. On each side of the hall was a smaller room of unknown function.

The western part of the hall, including the facade of the sanctuary, should probably be seen as a functional unit on its own. Position and layout, as well as the fragmentarily preserved offering scenes, point towards an identification as a so-called offering hall. In the south and the north there are small subsidiary rooms without any trace of wall decoration or equipment.

The rear wall of the main hall was formed by the cliff face. Along the east-west axis of the temple lay the entrance to a small rock-cut chamber – roughly 2 ½ to 3 m large and 1 ½ m high. Doubtless this small rock-cut room functioned as the sanctuary, where the main deity of the temple was provided with the appropriate ritual performances.

In the last century, remnants of the wall decoration were still preserved in the main hall, at the façade of the sanctuary and in the sanctuary itself. The rock walls in the sanctuary and the cliff face in front of it had been covered with a thin layer of mud plaster and this was lime-washed as a ground for the decoration which had been painted in vivid colours and with a great richness in detail.

The paintings from the sanctuary of the temple

In 1964 seven panels of the wall decoration from the innermost part of the temple were detached from the walls, stuck into wooden frames, and transported to Cairo, where they have been kept since then in the basement of the Egyptian Museum. The general condition of the panels is not too bad: the wooden frames are in good shape and stable, and despite some

damaged parts substantial remains of the wall decoration are left. But the present condition of the paintings urgently calls for their new conservation; especially a thorough cleaning of the surfaces which are covered with dirt and dust is needed.

These seven pieces from the wall decoration of the Amenhotep III temple are the topic of the ongoing project whose first season is reported here.

The panels can be identified as follows (for their original position inside the temple see the corresponding numbers in the temple plan, fig. 1):

1. Sanctuary's façade, south part (pl. II), 153 cm broad, 120,5 cm high



Pl. II: Sanctuary's façade, south part (by Katy Doyle, October 2010)

The largely destroyed upper register displayed Amenhotep III standing with offerings before a deity who most probably had been – at least originally – the god Amun. Only the legs of the king with an accompanying inscription and the lower part of an offering stand are left. In the only slightly damaged lower register, a procession of the corn god, a field goddess and the upper Egyptian Nile god is depicted carrying offerings. Three accompanying inscriptions mention the bringing of the products in favor of 'Amun, the Lord of the Ways'.

2. Sanctuary's façade, north part (pl. III), 153 x 122 cm



Pl. III: Sanctuary's façade, north part (by Katy Doyle, October 2010)

The northern side of the façade is completely destroyed in its upper part and severely damaged in the lower part, especially at the left side, but most probably it was quite similar in its decoration to the one at the southern side. In the lower register a procession of probably the corn god, a field goddess and this time the lower Egyptian Nile god carries offerings towards the speos entrance.

3. Sanctuary's east wall, south of the entrance (pl. IV), 72,5 x 126 cm

4. Sanctuary's east wall, north of the entrance (pl. V), 78 x 126 cm



Pls. IV-V: Sanctuary's east wall, south and north of the entrance (by Katy Doyle, October 2010)

Both severely damaged panels consist of two vertical lines with the names and titles of Amenhotep III, beloved of Amun.

5. South wall of the sanctuary (pl. VI), 303 x 153 cm



Pl. VI: South wall of the sanctuary (by Katy Doyle, October 2010)

The south wall of the speos which is largely destroyed in its upper part especially in the eastern section, shows the king – presumably originally with libations and incense – in front of the enthroned Amun, who is depicted in anthropomorphic form with the tall double feather crown. Between them, offerings are set up, with a large offering list above. An inscription in front of the god displays his partly reworked name and epithets: ‘[A]mun, lord of the sky, [lord] of the thrones of Both Lands, who rests [upon] his pure seat of eternity’.

6. North wall of the sanctuary (pl. VII), 302 x 153 cm



Pl. VII: North wall of the sanctuary (by Katy Doyle, October 2010)

On the north wall of the speos which is also heavily damaged especially in its middle upper part, a similar scene as on the south wall is depicted: the king is consecrating offerings to the enthroned Amun, with traces of the reworked name and epithets of the god.

7. West wall of the sanctuary (pl. VIII), 242,5 x 158 cm



Pl. VIII: West wall of the sanctuary (by Katy Doyle, October 2010)

In the right half of the rear wall which is largely destroyed at the top, Amenhotep III – identified by two cartouches in front of him – is shown, standing with a water cup before the enthroned Amun who is again, as on the side walls, presented in anthropomorphic form bearing the double feather crown. In front of the god there is a three line inscription with the reworked name of the deity, which should probably be read as ‘... [Amun, Lord of the] Ways (?), lord of the sky [...] who establishes a pure place’. In the left half of the rear wall which is damaged at the top and the southern edge and largely destroyed in the lower part a vulture is shown, hovering with folded wings above a clump of papyrus, with schen-rings in its claws. It looks to the left and bears the white crown, flanked by two ostrich feathers. Above each of the wings there are two feathered cartouches of Amenhotep III. At the far left a ram’s head rests on a high pedestal, surmounted by an ostrich feather fan. The accompanying inscription is to be read as ‘Amun-Ra, lord of the [sky]’.

Work conducted in October 2010

The first preliminary season of the project took place between October 16 and October 26, 2010 in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.² Participants in the project were Martina Ullmann from Munich University as project director, Katy Doyle from Boston as photographer and Luigi De Cesaris, Alberto Sucato, and Emiliano Ricchi from Rome as conservators. The work which was conducted in the basement of the Egyptian Museum was supervised by Sabah Abd el-Raziq, as the responsible curator.

In the first week of the 2010 campaign a first-time digital photographic documentation of all seven panels was done by Katy Doyle. The main goal thereby was to produce professionally lit, high resolution stitched images of the paintings before any intervention by the conservation was done. They can be compared later with images taken post-conservation.

In the second week a small series of test cleanings was done by the conservation team (see pls. IX-X). The results of these cleanings were very promising and enabled us to determine

exactly the work which has to be done in the future campaigns. In addition information was gained about the methods which can be used to better comprehend the complex stratigraphy of the different layers of the paintings in regard to the investigation and the proper understanding of the consecutive decoration phases of the temple.



Pl. IX: Luigi de Cesaris, Alberto Sucato, and Emiliano Ricchi working on two of the panels (by Martina Ullmann, October 2010)



Pl. X: Test cleaning at the south part of the façade (by Martina Ullmann, October 2010)

The alterations within the wall decoration of the temple

Numerous traces of reworking can be detected within the wall decoration on the façade and inside the sanctuary. The examination of the paintings in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo in November 2008 and the recent investigation during the first campaign of the project in October 2010 confirmed the existence of several layers of painting at various spots on the façade as well as on the south, north wall, and west wall of the sanctuary.

One of the main goals of the project is a scrutinized investigation of the various layers of painting in all seven panels in order to achieve a reliable reconstruction of the different decoration phases of the innermost part of the temple which can subsequently be used as a basis for the historical, religious, and art historical interpretation of the wall decoration.

The preliminary results regarding the alterations within the wall decoration can be summarized as follows: There are clear indications towards at least three different decoration phases, during which the focus of the cult activity in the temple was shifted from Amun towards a falcon-headed person with the double crown – most probably to be identified with the divine Amenhotep III – and back to Amun again. The first phase coincides with the erection of the temple at an up to now unknown date during the reign of Amenhotep III. The second phase which seems to have displayed a falcon-headed person as cult recipient on the

side walls and on the rear wall most probably dates in the last decade of the reign of Amenhotep III. A new cult focus on the king in his divine manifestation as Horus in the sanctuary of Wadi es-Sebua may have been motivated by the first sed-festival of Amenhotep III in his 30th regnal year.³ The rituals accomplished during the sed-festival constituted the – updated – theological background for the cult of the living king. In connection with it, additions and alterations were conducted in most – if not all – temples of Amenhotep III in Egypt and Nubia. A multiplicity of new statues was erected, which very often displayed, in numerous variants, the divine aspects of the king.⁴ A conversion of the sanctuary in Wadi es-Sebua into a place for the royal cult in Lower Nubia would fit into this context and can be seen in parallel to the royal cult in the temple at Soleb in Upper Nubia.

During the reign of Akhenaten all remaining traces of the god Amun within the temple decoration at Wadi es-Sebua were extinguished, including the name of Amun within the cartouches of Amenhotep III. Besides this the decoration seems not to have been altered.

In the third phase, which was executed at the earliest during the reign of Tutankhamun or which at the latest coincided with some attested activity in the temple during the reign of Ramesses II, the situation of the first decoration phase was re-established: the main deity of the temple was again the god Amun, first of all in his specific local aspect as ‘Lord of the Ways’.⁵

Currently the continuation of the project is being planned in order to conduct the actual conservation, to study the different layers of the paintings, to accomplish the photographic documentation and to prepare the digital drawings.

¹ PM VII, 63-64; I. Hein, *Die Ramessidische Bautätigkeit in Nubien, Göttinger Orientforschungen, IV. Reihe: Ägypten* 22, ed. by F. Junge and W. Westendorf (Wiesbaden, 1991), 17-18; J. Jacquet, ‘Observations sur l’évolution architecturale des temples rupestres’, *CHE* 10 (Le Caire, 1966), 74-75; C.M. Firth, *The Archaeological Survey of Nubia. Report for 1910-1911* (Cairo, 1927), 235-237; G. Haeny, ‘Rapport préliminaire sur les fouilles à Ouadi el-Sebouà’, in *Fouilles en Nubie (1959-1961), Campagne Internationale de l’UNESCO pour la Sauvegarde des Monuments de la Nubie, Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte* (Le Caire, 1963), 53-62; J. De Cenival, G. Haeny, ‘Rapport préliminaire sur la troisième campagne de fouilles à Ouadi es-Sebouâ’, *BIFAO* 62 (1964), 219-229; C. Desroches Noblecourt, *Le secret des temples de la Nubie* (Paris, 1999), 153-161.

² The author wishes to thank Zahi Hawass and Wafaa el-Sadeek for the permission to work in the Egyptian Museum as well as Sabah Abd el-Raziq and all the other staff members of the museum for the excellent cooperation. Furthermore I would like to express my sincere thanks to ARCE for providing the funding for the first campaign of this project.

³ For the well documented representations of Amenhotep III as a falcon in statuary and in relief see A. Radwan, ‘Zur bildlichen Gleichsetzung des ägyptischen Königs mit der Gottheit’, *MDAIK* 31 (1975), 99-108 (especially 100-104); S. Bickel, ‘Aspects et fonctions de la déification d’Amenhotep III’, *BIFAO* 102 (2002), 63-83; A. Grimm, H.A. Schlögl, *Das thebanische Grab Nr. 136 und der Beginn der Amarnazeit* (Wiesbaden, 2005), 16 (with further references in the footnotes 99-105). For a possible three-dimensional depiction of Amenhotep III as a falcon with the double crown atop a small shrine in Gebel es-Silsila see M.G. Legrain, ‘Notes d’Inspection’, *ASAE* 4 (1903), 205-209. I owe this reference to Ali Radwan.

⁴ W.R. Johnson, ‘Monuments and Monumental Art under Amenhotep III: Evolution and Meaning’, in D. O’Connor, E.H. Cline (eds.), *Amenhotep III – Perspectives on His Reign* (Ann Arbor, 1998), 89; B.M. Bryan, ‘Designing the Cosmos: Temples and Temple Decoration’, in A.P. Kozloff, B.M. Bryan, L.M. Berman, (eds.), *Egypt’s Dazzling Sun. Amenhotep III and His World* (special exhibition catalogue, Cleveland, 1992), 110-111; B.M. Bryan, ‘Royal and Divine Statuary’, in A.P. Kozloff, B.M. Bryan, L.M. Berman, (eds.), *Egypt’s Dazzling Sun. Amenhotep III and His World* (special exhibition catalogue, Cleveland, 1992), 125-153.

⁵ For a more comprehensive discussion of the different phases of the temple decoration see the author’s article in the forthcoming Festschrift in honor of Abdel Ghaffar Shedid.