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The temple of Ptah at Karnak

Since October 2008 the Franco-Egyptian team at Karnak has been studying the temple of Ptah, which has inscriptions dating from the time of Tuthmosis III to that of the Roman Emperor Tiberius.

Christophe Thiers and **Pierre Zignani** describe the main preliminary results.



General view of the temple of Ptah, in the northern area of the Amun-Re precinct. © CNRS-CFEETK/Jean-François Gout

The pre-Tuthmosid origin of the Ptah temple at Karnak remains obscure but a sanctuary dedicated to the god probably existed in the same place, dating back at least to the Seventeenth Dynasty, as shown by the upper part of a stela found by Georges Legrain at the beginning of the twentieth century, of the reign of King Intef VII Nubkhepera. It was recently republished by Daniel Polz (*Der Beginn des Neuen Reiches: zur Vorgeschichte einer Zeitenwende*, 2007) and shows Amun-Re, Mut and the king ‘beloved of Ptah, Lord of Maat, King of the Two Lands’. The temple’s foundation stela dedicated by Tuthmosis III (Cairo CG 34013) also implies that there was an earlier version as on it the king says that he ‘found this temple built of brick, the columns and the doors made of wood, going to ruin’.

Another early monument at the temple, in the southern part of the portico, is the red granite base of a *naos*, which was uncovered by Mariette and published by him in 1875. This bears the name of Amenemhat I but is dedicated to Amun-Re. We are indebted to Dorothy Arnold and Adela



The *naos* base of Amenemhat I with its restored and replaced right corner (see inset), returned to Egypt by the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Arts, New York. © CNRS-CFEETK/Pauline Batard

Oppenheim, curators at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, who identified a granite fragment in a private collection as being a missing corner of this *naos* base. The Metropolitan Museum organised its return to its original location in January 2010, in the

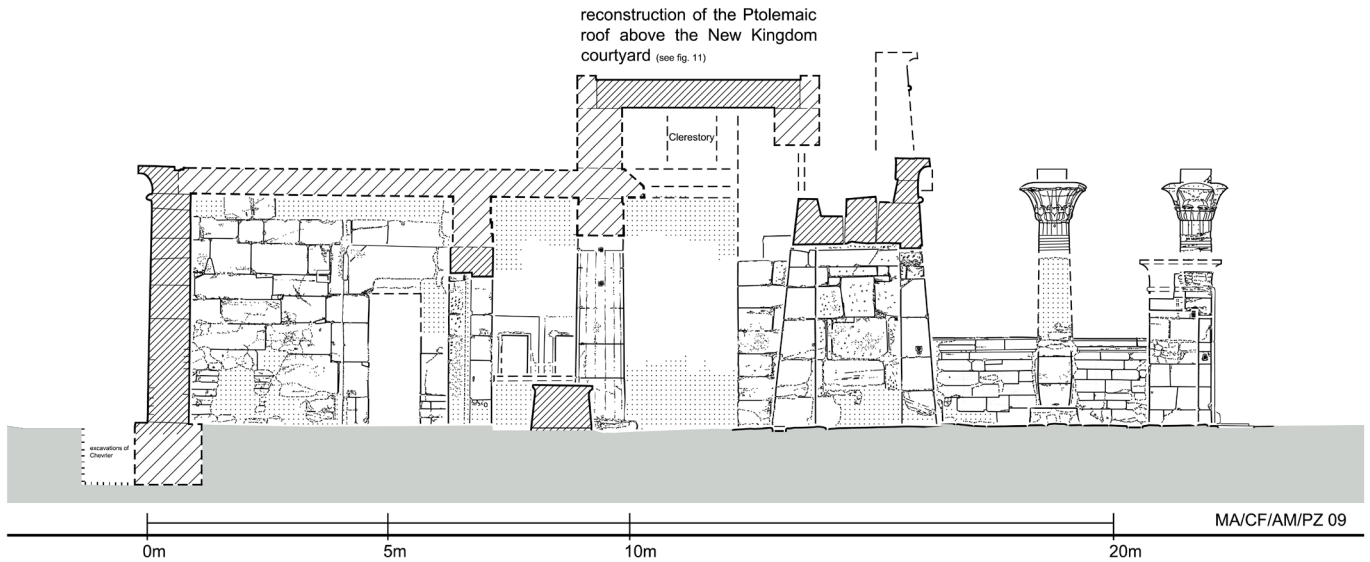
presence of Farouk Hosni, Minister of Culture, and Zahi Hawass, General Director of the SCA.

The oldest part of the temple of Ptah consists of a triple-cell structure built by Tuthmosis III. The central chamber is dedicated to Amun-Re, as the temple was a way-station for the barque of the god during his annual processions, which survived until the Roman Period. This main chamber gives access to two chapels: one for Hathor on the southern side, and one for Ptah on the northern side. In the front is a portico with two polygonal columns opening on to a small courtyard. The foundation of the Eighteenth Dynasty sanctuary consists of two layers of roughly bonded stone, the first one in limestone and the second in sandstone. It is noteworthy that the builders in the reign of Tuthmosis III were reusing blocks not only of Queen Hatshepsut but also of Tuthmosis III himself. These blocks are parts of the door jambs of an unknown building, dedicated to Amun-Re, which must have stood for only a short time. The surviving pavement shows re-used older limestone slabs with cornices on the side.

The decoration of Tuthmosis III was completed inside the chapels and on the walls of the portico while the southern elevation of the courtyard was decorated by the last kings of the Eighteenth Dynasty (Ay and Horemheb) and the northern one by Ptolemy IV.



The northern outer foundation of Tuthmosis III's building with a re-used limestone block of Hatshepsut (see inset). © CNRS-CFEETK/Jean-François Gout



Longitudinal section through the temple (Tuthmosis III, Ptolemy III and IV). © CNRS-CFEETK

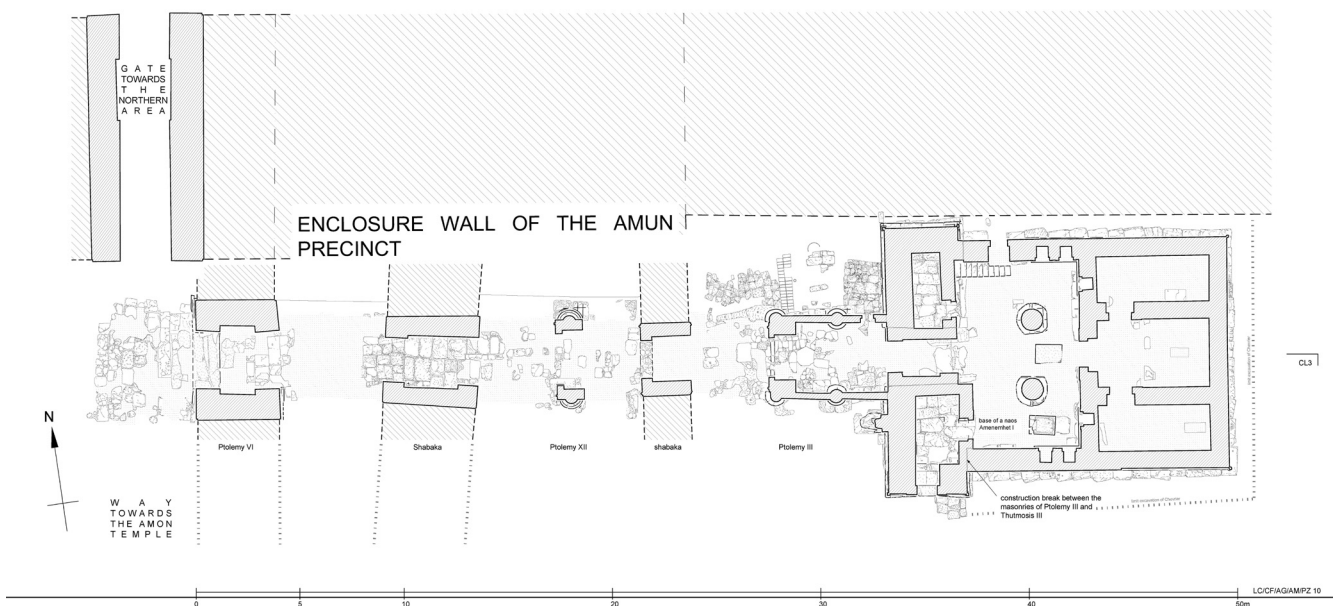
The main transformation of the temple occurred in the reigns of Ptolemy III and Ptolemy IV and mostly concerned the courtyard. The axial gate of the courtyard was dedicated by Tuthmosis III but there is insufficient evidence to show whether or not the original New Kingdom courtyard was the same size as its Ptolemaic successor. Several transformations of this entrance can be observed; for example, the raising of the passage by adding a new course of smaller blocks. Since there is an added inscription of Takeloth II on the inner southern door jamb, the raising of the passage may have been done at least during the Twenty-Second Dynasty. The size of the door-wing was also enlarged, and the iconography of the exterior elevation of the gate was renewed in Ptolemaic style, in the name of Tuthmosis III.

Before the Ptolemaic Period, the environment of the sanctuary changed radically, around the time of the Thirtieth Dynasty, with the enlargement of the main precinct of the temple of Amun-Re. Originally the Ptah temple was outside the Eighteenth Dynasty *temenos* of the

Amun-Re temple but its Thirtieth Dynasty enclosure was enlarged to include the temple of Ptah while still excluding the northern area of its annexes. The huge mud-brick wall was built less than one metre from the northern wall of the Tuthmosis III building, restricting the northern lateral access and surely hindering all the temple's daily activities.

This situation explains some of the Ptolemaic transformations of the western side of the courtyard. The original northern small door of the court could no longer be used because of the new enclosure wall and the Ptolemaic construction, and was also partially blocked by a new staircase leading to the roof. A secondary entrance, linked with the annexes, was thus inserted into the southern part to allow access into the courtyard, via a vestibule.

There is, in fact, evidence that the courtyard ceased to be open to the sky following this transformation. From the scattered blocks lying around the temple, we have been able to identify and restore one axial slab, showing



General plan of the temple of Ptah. © CNRS-CFEETK



The inner elevation of the main gate (Tuthmosis III) of the courtyard with the names of Takeloth II (left). The last layer of stone below the lintel was added in an ancient restoration of the gate.
© CNRS-CFEETK/Pierre Zignani



The Ptolemaic staircase partly blocking the northern entrance to the courtyard, with the enclosure wall of the Amun-Re precinct in the background. © CNRS-CFEETK/Pierre Zignani



The central chamber with two limestone roofing slabs reused as pavement and foundation of the southern wall; the door at the top of the photograph leads to the south chamber. © CNRS-CFEETK/Jean-François Gout



The main gate of Tuthmosis III partly renewed under Ptolemy III; the cartouches of Tuthmosis III were recarved in Ptolemaic style.
© CNRS-CFEETK/Pierre Zignani



A restored Ptolemaic roofing slab which covered the New Kingdom courtyard. © CNRS-CFEETK/Jean-François Gout



Constructional details of the Ptolemaic clerestory lighting and roofing of the courtyard. One of the scattered blocks has been replaced on the top of the wall. © CNRS-CFEETK/Pierre Zignani



The southern wall of the courtyard: Amun, Ptah, Khonsu, Mut and Hathor, with a recarved cartouche of Horemheb. © CNRS-CFEETK/Jean-François Gout



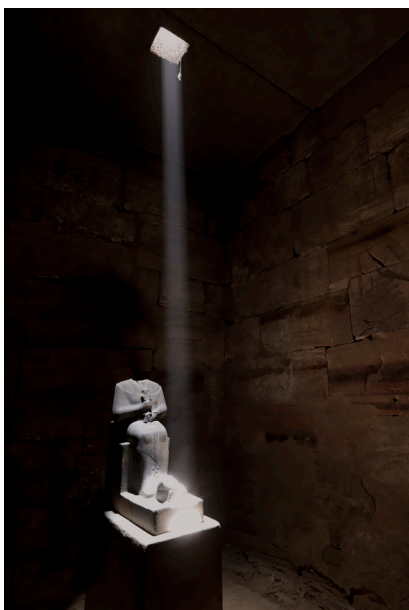
View of the Coptic settlement built on the remains of the Ptolemaic enclosure wall, with two granite column bases in front of a southern gate.
© CNRS-CFEETK/Jean-François Gout

the vultures Nekhbet and Wadjyt, which, when replaced, provides evidence for the support of a ceiling. Above the original cornice there are also two openings with recess bands to insert clerestory windows.

Later architectural work at the temple was minor: a new gate with the name of Ptolemy VI was built westward onto the way between the temple of Amun and the northern precincts of Karnak and the last construction was in the reign of Ptolemy XII when an intermediate and isolated door was added between the two Twenty-Fifth Dynasty gates, decorated by King Shabaka.

After it ceased to function as a cult-place, the temple housed a Coptic settlement, which greatly reduced the pharaonic brick walls and annexes of the temple. The abundant ceramic remains date this settlement to the fifth to sixth centuries AD.

As part of the main epigraphic survey, investigations all around the temple brought to light numerous blocks and a restoration programme is now under way on all those blocks which have suffered from wet saline soil. After restoration, they can be studied and some of them



The central chamber at the summer solstice 2010 at solar noon: this spectacular effect is due to modern reconstruction.
© CNRS-CFEETK/Jean-François Gout

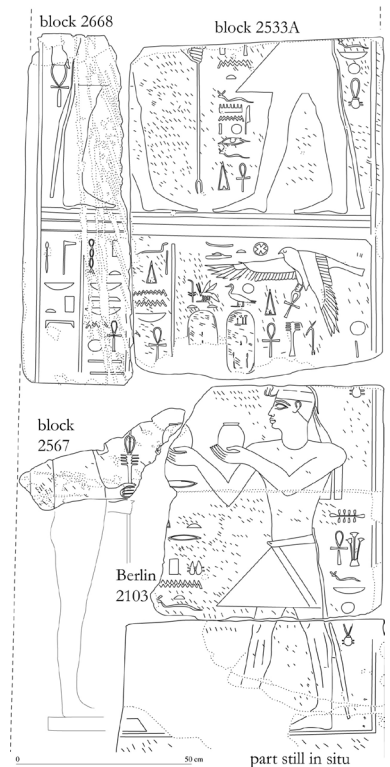


The northern chamber at the summer solstice 2010 at solar noon: lit by the original lighting shaft, just inside the door. © CNRS-CFEETK/Jean-François Gout

Reconstruction drawing of the southern inner door jamb of the first gate of Shabaka, with epigraphic copies of three scattered blocks found in the field and one now in Berlin.

© CNRS-CFEETK

can be replaced in their original locations on top of the walls and thus contribute to a better understanding of the temple for visitors. Investigations also brought to light some reused blocks, of the reigns of Merenptah and Ramesses III. Hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic graffiti are currently being studied to complete the global approach to researches on the Ptah temple.



To conclude, we would like to issue a word of warning about some modern alterations made by our predecessors. People come from all over the world to see, in the southern lateral chapel of the temple of Ptah, the re-erected statue of Sekhmet just below a zenithal opening, through which sunlight - or moonlight on certain nights - filters on to the statue. In the central chamber, at noon during the summer solstice the sun's rays light directly the statue of a kneeling king (only the legs are preserved) in front of the god Ptah. Unfortunately for the atmosphere-lovers, the lighting of these statues was not part of the ancient design of the temple and the missing slabs directly above them were removed by Legrain to create light-openings. Genuine ancient work can be seen in the northern chapel, which still preserves its original roof, and here the zenithal opening is located not above the god's statue but just inside the entrance door in order to provide light for the priest who entered to perform the daily cult.

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