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The early temple of Ptah at Karnak

Recent excavations in the temple of Ptah at Karnak confirm the existence of an earlier mud-brick sanctuary. **Guillaume Charloux** and **Christophe Thiers** unveil the first elements of the discovery.

The area of the Ptah temple at Karnak under study.

The temple of Ptah, built by Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC, Eighteenth Dynasty), is located at the northern limit of the religious domain of Karnak (see *Egyptian Archeology* 38). The existence of an earlier temple – the date of which remains unknown – is recorded in two inscriptions of the present temple and on a stela erected by Thutmose III and restored later by Seti I (1290–1279 BC) (Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire, GC 34013):

(...) *My majesty found this temple built of mud brick, its columns and its doors in wood, which went to ruin. My majesty ordered to stretch the line for the temple again, edifying it in perfect white sandstone, the walls protecting it being made of bricks in durable work for eternity* (...) (transl. after S. Biston-Moulin)

One of the objectives set by the archaeologists of the Ptah Temple Study and Restoration Programme, undertaken since 2008 by the French-Egyptian Centre for the Study of the Karnak Temples, was to investigate the lower levels of the sandstone monument of Thutmose III and attempt to confirm this epigraphic information.

Before the installation of a modern pavement, the basements of the three chapels of the sanctuary were explored in 2010–11, followed by the courtyard and temple entrance during the next two campaigns. A study of the area surrounding the monument, undertaken between 2014 and 2016, culminated in the excavation of the temple's foundation pit in the east and south, and of four perpendicular trenches. Unfortunately, the archaeological levels beneath and around the temple were

disturbed by looting holes and the modern restorations of Georges Legrain in the 1900s. However, despite the incomplete nature of the available data, extensive remains of mud-brick walls were uncovered during this operation.

These vestiges reveal a structure of at least 14.8 m in length (east-west) in the north, 12.16 m in width (north-south). The architectural plan coincides with a tripartite building comprising three rooms at the back of a large space (probably a courtyard), situated behind a transverse room. The walls have a uniform thickness of 1.2 m or 1.3 m (2.5 cubits). These are certainly foundations, as evidenced by the presence of foundation pits, filled often with ceramic sherds. However, in three places, part of the elevation of the walls has been preserved, the interval having been filled with intentionally crushed sherds mixed with some brown silt, in which flint tools and seal impressions have been found. No floor was observed. The orientation of the vestiges corresponds to that of the temple of Amun and differs by about -6.5° from that of the upper sandstone temple.

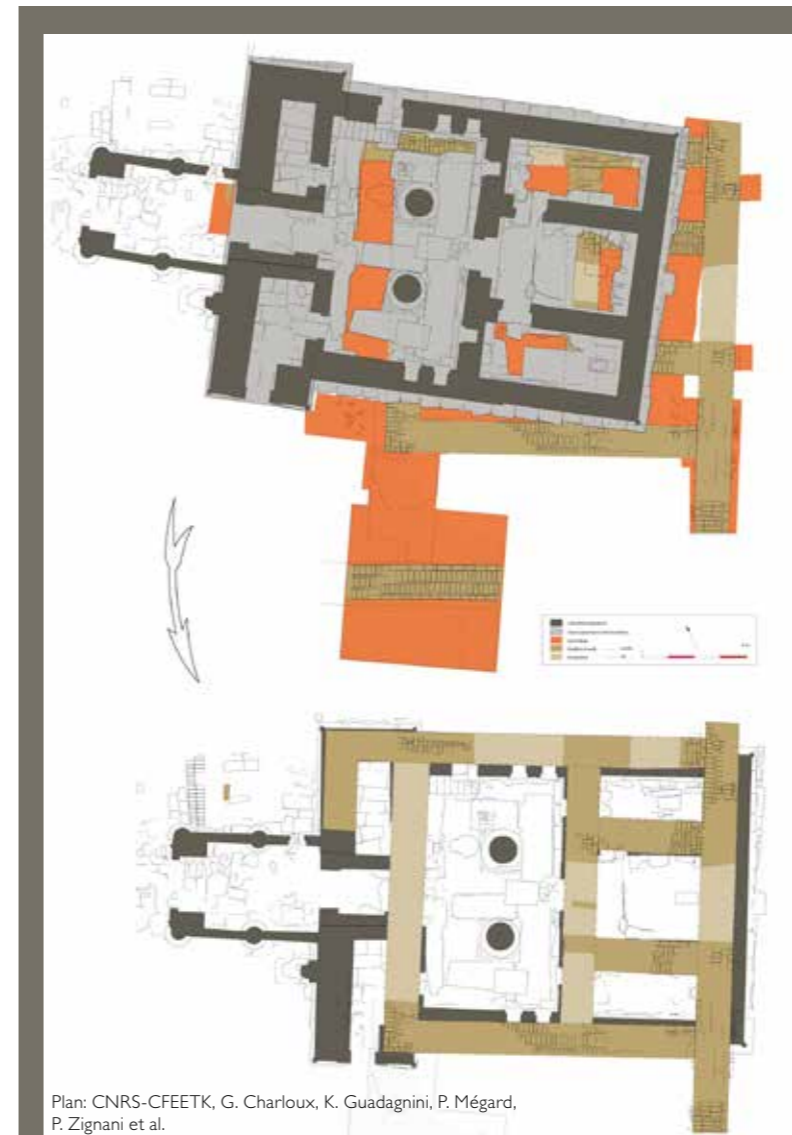
From a more general point of view, the plan of the edifice is symmetrical with respect to the central axis. The only exception is an extension of two walls to the west, which is not present in the south. However, the nature of this tripartite edifice becomes evident when the plan of the mud-brick walls is superimposed on the sandstone temple plan, after adjusting its orientation by the diverging 6.5° and shifting its northeastern corner 3 m to the west. The superimposition of the two constructions demonstrates clearly that the New Kingdom plan of the Ptah temple conforms to the layout of its predecessor (see the map, opposite page).

The correlation between the earlier and later plans suggests that Thutmose III chose to erect his sandstone monument from an architectural model in mud brick. This type of copying, with some alterations or extensions, is well-known in the architectural history of ancient Egypt. One of the most famous cases is certainly that of the funerary temples of Deir el-Bahari, which repeat models from the reigns of Montuhotep II (c. 2061–2010 BC) through that of Hatshepsut (c. 1478–1458 BC). Similarly,

Mud-brick walls in the foundation of the central chapel of the temple of Ptah, consecrated to Amun and today sheltering a statue of the god Ptah.



Photo: CNRS-CFEETK / J.-F. Gout.



Plan: CNRS-CFEETK, G. Charloux, K. Guadagnini, P. Mégard, P. Zignani et al.

excavations of the temple of Amun at Karnak between 2002 and 2005 have revealed other mud-brick remains that were replaced successively by stone monuments of the New Kingdom, which took the earlier structures as their model. Given the obvious architectural relationship between the brick and sandstone buildings under consideration here, it seems reasonable to suggest that the structure erected prior to that of Thutmose III might likewise have been consecrated to Ptah and Hathor, as guests of Amun at Karnak.

The dating of the mud-brick building proceeded from the study of the material discovered in the foundation pits and in the filling of the wall intervals. The objects placed there appear to represent a secondary context, subsequent to their use originally in civil – probably artisanal or administrative – contexts. Almost all of the ceramic groups (S. Marchand), whether Egyptian or imported, clearly fall within the chronological framework of the late Seventeenth through early Eighteenth Dynasties, with a small number of residual sherds from the late Middle Kingdom and the Thirteenth Dynasty. Some ceramic forms, however, are clearly diagnostic for the Eighteenth Dynasty: for instance, a jar of marl fabric and a few bottoms of tubular bread moulds with an umbilicus cannot be earlier than the beginning of that period. Conversely,

Above: a plan of the mud-brick remains discovered under the temple of Ptah of Thutmose III, showing the plan of the remains of brick after superimposition on the sandstone elevations of the temple of Thutmose III.

Right: mud-brick wall remains cut by the foundation of the northern wall of the temple courtyard.



Photo: CNRS-CFEETK, J.-F. Gout.



Photo: CNRS-CFEETK,
G. Charloux, K. Guadagnini,
P. Mégard et al.

the complete absence of 'black-painted style', bichrome or polychrome ceramics, as well as blue-painted ceramics, attested elsewhere in Karnak, do not support the assignation of the pottery to a later phase of the Eighteenth Dynasty, which is logical when considering the digging of these brick remains for the building of the temple of Thutmose III. The study of the seal impressions (J. Roberson) supports a *terminus post-quem* from the late Middle Kingdom, in agreement with data from the ceramic assemblage. Twenty-six print sealings and hundreds of fragments without decoration were recovered. Significantly, most of the identifiable motifs from the present corpus seem to fall in the later Middle Kingdom or Second Intermediate Period range. Finally, a funerary stela invoking the god Ptah (studied by S. Biston-Moulin), which may be dated to the end of the Seventeenth Dynasty to the beginning of the Eighteenth, was discovered

in a pit cut by the foundation trench of the sandstone temple and was likely to be installed in the sanctuary of the deity. All this evidence therefore suggests a late Seventeenth/early Eighteenth Dynasties *terminus post-quem* for the construction of the early mud-brick temple.

The presence of numerous limestone blocks discovered in the first course of foundation of the sandstone temple of Ptah, some of which bear elements from the titulary of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III, might indicate a period of construction or, more likely, restoration during the co-regency. The origins of these blocks are not presently known, although some include mention of the god Amun. However, all of them appear to belong to doorposts, which were inserted in mud-brickworks. Unfortunately, the significance of this association – limestone blocks of unknown origin and mud-brick building – remains difficult to ascertain at this stage of research. The stela of Thutmose III (CGC 34013 = KIU 555) states unambiguously that the early temple of Ptah was found in ruins, prompting its reconstruction. However, the ceramic analysis suggests that the prior monument was no more than a century old when it was replaced by the sandstone temple. Although this sort of formula constitutes a stereotyped topos of dedication and (re)construction (i.e., ruined temple, built of perishable materials, reconstructed in stone), it would appear that actual degradation of an original mud-brick structure, necessitating an ambitious new building programme in stone, did in fact occur. However, we cannot dismiss the political dimensions of such a gesture, if the previous edifice bore the cartouches of queen Hatshepsut.

Above right: large stratigraphic sounding south of the temple of Ptah at Karnak in 2016. At the bottom of the image appears the southern angle of the mud-brick temple cleared during the excavation. A small rectangular window was opened in this corner to check for the possible presence of a foundation deposit.

Left: clearance of mud-brick walls in the southern foundation pit of the temple of Ptah.



Photo: CNRS-CFEETK,
G. Charloux.

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