

# **ARCE TALATAT PROJECT, KARNAK**

## **PRELIMINARY REPORT**

**Covering period: 2008-2009 SEASON**

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The ARCE Talatat Project at Karnak is documenting approximately 16,000 talatat blocks from the reign of Akhnaten, which are at present stored in the so-called ‘Pennsylvania’ magazine situated against the west wall of the Khonsu Temple. The blocks were discovered in the Second and Ninth Pylons, and the foundations of the Hypostyle Hall in the first half of the 20th century. The talatat, which are of a more or less uniform size, approximately 52 x 22 x 26 cm, are piled in the magazine in 14 stacks, each approximately 18 metres long and about 2.5 metres high (8–9 courses of blocks), arranged on either side of a central aisle. The stacks are ‘double-sided’, i.e. the talatat are arranged back to back, so that the decorated surfaces are visible on both sides, and each side of the stack has a separate number, e.g. 1 and 2, 3 and 4, etc. Between the 14 major stacks there were originally lower stacks, many of them containing talatat decorated on more than one surface. However, most of these were dismantled at some time in the past, and their blocks piled alongside the main stacks.

From 5 –17 August, 2008, a preliminary survey was made of the existing condition of the talatat stored in the magazine, in order to plan for the next stage of the project, which would involve cleaning, conservation, photography, and database recording. The survey was carried out by the Project Director Jocelyn Gohary, and Assistant Director Rawya Ismail, and a digital photographic record was made by Matjaz Kačičnik. From 21–24

September, Jocelyn Gohary and Rawya Ismail supervised the clearing of the floor of the magazine from thick layers of dust, and large mounds of earth heaped up by foxes.

The main work of the Talatat Project commenced in the 'Pennsylvania' talatat magazine on 12 October, 2008, with the Project Director Jocelyn Gohary, Assistant Director Rawya Ismail, Conservation Supervisor Hiroko Kariya, and Egyptologist Lindsay Vosburg. The Project Photographers, Sara Lafleur, and Owen Murray, joined on 26 October. Egyptologist Jacquelyn Williamson joined the Project on 2 February 2009, and Claire d'Izarny replaced Hiroko Kariya as Conservation Supervisor on 30 March.

During September 2008, an existing cement mastaba along the west outer wall of the magazine had been made wider, and a tented work area created around this cement floor, extending for a length of approximately 20 meters. The canvas canopy was later extended outwards in February 2009 to make a larger working space for the conservators, outside the covered area because of the large amount of dust brushed off the talatat as they are being cleaned. A survey was made of the condition of the major stacks in the magazine, and three of them which were leaning outwards dangerously in parts were supported with wooden planks covered in sponge in order to protect the decorated surfaces of the talatat.

With regard to the system of dealing with the talatat, each talatat is taken out of the magazine and processed separately. First the block is examined by the conservators, surface cleaned, treated if necessary, and a written report is made on the condition of the block. Each talatat is given a new 6-digit number, which incorporates the original stack number assigned by the Akhenaten Temple Project in the late 1960s. This is based on the assumption that blocks in the same stack may have been located close to each other when they were discovered in modern times, and so may have come from the same part of the Aten Temple when it was dismantled by the ancient Egyptians. The data on the carved surface of the block is recorded on a site data sheet, with details on the block including the type of block, whether header or stretcher, its measurements, the subject of the scene depicted, any architectural features, and the colours of any surviving pigment. The block is then photographed with a digital camera at high resolution. After processing, the talatat

are restacked in the magazine. Blocks with a number starting with the same two digits, which indicate the stack location from which the blocks came, are stored together, and when each new stack is completed, it is covered with plastic sheeting to protect the talatat from dust. As well as the wooden shelving inside the magazine to the left of the door for storing talatat fragments, more shelving has been installed to the right of the door for the badly damaged talatat which cannot be restacked.

Individual processing of the talatat is enabling more detailed information on them to be recorded, particularly with regard to the colours of the pigments used, and the painted details on figures, jewellery, hieroglyphs, buildings, offerings, etc. Some blocks have more than one decorated surface, either both ends, or one long side and one end, i.e. a corner block, and many cornice blocks have been recorded. These types of talatat may eventually throw some light on the possible architecture of the different parts of the Karnak Aten Temple. Numerous blocks from the so-called 'Nefertiti pillars' have also been processed. The images and data collected are being inserted in a comprehensive database, to facilitate further research on this valuable source material for the early years of Akhenaten's reign.

The talatat lying on the floor of the magazine between the 14 major stacks were dealt with first, as they were most in need of attention. About 5% of them have been badly affected by ground water, because they have not been stored on mastabas. Processing these blocks first would also make access to the main stacks easier. After processing, they were stored on several new mastabas constructed between the major stacks as space for them became available. Work on these talatat, a total of 2358 blocks, was completed on 12 February, except for those to the east of Stacks 9/10 and 11/12, which have collapsed in that direction, and will be dealt with as the major stacks are being processed.

Dismantling and processing the large main stacks of talatat began on 12 February. As some of the original mastabas are no longer effective protection against rising ground water, many of the blocks in the lowest course of the major stacks are visibly damp, and have cracked under the weight of the talatat stacked above them. However, the majority of the blocks in the main stacks are in reasonably good condition, and as anticipated, the work is now proceeding faster. The number of blocks cleaned, recorded and photographed per day has already increased considerably, to an average of 80 blocks a day.

Each main stack contains approximately 900 talatat, and to date five main stacks have been processed, and work is progressing on the sixth. The old stack number is retained in the new number assigned to each block, in order to assist in any further study of the original association of decorated themes in the Aten temple. The mastabas uncovered so far are in poor condition, and have subsided, causing the stacks to lean outwards in places, so as each mastaba is cleared, it is resurfaced with burlap, cement and lime mortar in order to protect the restacked blocks from the effects of ground water, and make the stacks more stable.

A total of 7,373 talatat have been processed by the project since work began in the 'Pennsylvania' magazine on 12 October 2008. It is estimated that a further 1,200-1,400 blocks will be documented by the end of the season on 25 June 2009, leaving seven stacks, approximately 7,000 blocks still to be processed.

A new SCA inspector was assigned to the Talatat Project every two months, and an SCA conservator worked with the project each month. I wish to thank very much the SCA Inspectors Mona Fathy Sayed, Osama Abdel Mogood Abdallah, Abdel Satar Badri, and Fawzy Helmy Okail for their help in ensuring that the Talatat Project continued to run smoothly, and also thank the SCA conservators, Saadi Zaki Abdallah, Mohamed

Abdallah Ahmed, Safaa Abdel Azeem Amien, Mohamed Fathy El-Hayk Moosa, Wafaa Hassan Mohamed, Magda Kamel, Fathy Fares Abader, Nahla Shawkey Habib and Fayez Shaker Maximus for their hard work. Thanks are also extended to the nine local workmen who have assisted with the work, under the supervision of Reis Mahmoud Farouk.

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