

ARCE TALATAT PROJECT, KARNAK

FIRST SEASON REPORT

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The American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) Talatat Project is one of a series of projects being carried out by ARCE at the Khonsu Temple, Karnak, in order to make the temple safer and more rewarding for tourists to visit. Against almost the entire length of the west wall of the temple is a large magazine, which was constructed in the 1950s and contains approximately 16,000 of the small sandstone blocks known as “talatat”, from the first temple which Akhenaten built for the Aten at Karnak in the early years of his reign. This temple was situated at the east end of the Karnak Temple complex, but was dismantled by the ancient Egyptians after Akhenaten’s death, because they regarded him as a heretic. The building blocks were reused in later constructions at Karnak during the late 18th and early 19th Dynasties, principally as fill in the massive Second, Ninth and Tenth Pylons, as well as in the foundations of the great Hypostyle Hall.

The term ‘talatat’ is of uncertain origin, but is exclusively used to define the small-size building blocks of both sandstone and limestone used during the reign of Akhenaten. The most likely explanation for the word is that it is derived from the Arabic word *talata*, meaning ‘three’, as the blocks are approximately three hand spans long, and are of a more or less uniform size, measuring approximately 52 x 22 x 26 cm. As well as the style of the carved decoration on the blocks, their dimensions are also one of the criteria for assigning them to the Amarna period.

Since the mid-19th century, these blocks have gradually come to light at Karnak in ever-increasing numbers, and have been stored at various locations in the temple complex. The largest of these storerooms of Akhenaten talatat is the one beside the Khonsu Temple, which is known as the “Pennsylvania” magazine. This refers to the Akhenaten Temple Project of University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, which studied the Akhenaten blocks stored at Karnak and Luxor Temples from 1966 to 1975.

The ARCE Talatat Project at Karnak is documenting the 16,000 talatat in the ‘Pennsylvania’ magazine, which are piled 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. 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 burrowing foxes.

The main work of the Talatat Project commenced in the 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 amounts of dust brushed off the talatat as they are being cleaned, and the use of chemicals for stabilization and pigment consolidation. 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 one 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 was installed to the right of the door for the badly damaged talatat which cannot be restacked. Towards the end of the season, further shelving for fragile blocks was constructed between the first two stacks on the left side of the magazine.

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, probably indicating an internal wall, or one long side and one end, i.e. a corner block, and many cornice blocks from the tops of walls have been recorded. Other architectural blocks identified include parts of doorways, and internal corners. These types of talatat may eventually throw some light on the possible architecture of the different parts of the Karnak Aten Temple. Excavations carried out thirty years ago by the Akhenaten Temple Project at East Karnak on the site of the Aten Temple uncovered the foundations of the outer walls of a vast colonnaded court, approximately 200 x 130 metres, but no definitive traces of structures within the court were found. Numerous blocks from the so-called 'Nefertiti pillars' have also been processed. These were square pillars built of talatat, which appear to have formed a colonnade with scenes showing only the queen, accompanied by one or two princesses, worshipping the Aten. An interesting discovery in the magazine was a foot and part of the dorsal pillar from a small kneeling statue of Akhenaten, which was found among the talatat. 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.

As well as the Akhenaten talatat, there are a number of other blocks in the magazine which are not talatat size, and are not carved in the same style. These are also being documented and entered in a separate 'non-talatat database. So far, 122 non-talatat blocks have been identified. The original locations and find sites of these blocks are unknown.

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 2289 blocks, was completed on

12 February 2009, 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 some have cracked, or shattered, 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 proceeded faster during the second half of the season. The number of blocks cleaned, recorded and photographed per day increased to an average of 80 blocks.

Each main stack contains approximately 900 talatat, and to date seven main stacks have been completed. 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.

By the end of the season's work in the 'Pennsylvania' magazine on 22 June 2009, 8,915 talatat had been processed by the project. This leaves seven stacks, approximately 7000 blocks, still to be documented. It is hoped that the work in the magazine will be completed during the coming season.

A new Supreme Council of Antiquities (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, Fayez Shaker Maximus, and Sayed Zaki Hassan for their hard work. Thanks are also given to the nine local workmen who have assisted with the work, under the supervision of Reis Mahmoud Farouk.

Sincere thanks are extended to the representatives of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, especially Zahi Hawass, Secretary General, for their support in facilitating our work. Particular gratitude is given to Mansour Boraik, Director General of Luxor Antiquities, and Ibrahim Soliman, Director of the Temples of Karnak, for providing continuous assistance and encouragement at all stages of our work, and thus enabling the ARCE Talatat Project to make good progress this season.