

SPECIALIST REPORT

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“Conservation of Roman Wall Paintings in Luxor Temple”

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Conservation of the Roman Paintings at the Temple of Luxor



Figure 1

Site Visit Report
Susanna McFadden
December 2007

The following report describes my activities and preliminary conclusions reached during a short visit to Luxor (December 12th – December 20th) for the end of the 2007 campaign of conservation addressing the Roman wall paintings in the Luxor temple. This project is sponsored by the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) and USAID in collaboration with the Epigraphic Survey of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago (Chicago House). Once again I thank both for their support and hospitality.

This season the conservators' turned their attention to the paintings on the southwest wall of the room, and to the apse of the Roman imperial cult chamber, having cleaned and consolidated the fresco fragments on the southeast wall the previous year. Like last year's site visit, the majority of my time in Luxor was spent documenting these new results for further research and consulting with both the conservators and Ray Johnson about any new discoveries, ideas etc., that might have come to light in the course of the campaign.

One of the first observations made was that the cleaning of the large fragment of fresco to the southwest of the apse revealed no great surprises. The remains of three figures, preserved from the waist to the hems of their tunics were discernable before cleaning, but this season's work brought out many details of their elegant dress, as well as the right leg of one of the figures. Wilkinson's watercolor drawing of this section of the room (pages 55 and 56 of his notebook) described the lower half of at least six figures, so it seems that a good portion of the composition visible in the 1850's is no longer *in situ*. However, what remains of the fragment corresponds fairly faithfully to Wilkinson's drawing, so we can be reasonably confident of a future digital or graphic reconstruction of the missing areas using Wilkinson's drawing as a guide. One minor

inconsistency can be noted however, the positioning of the sole remaining leg in relation to the figure on the far right (west) has been revealed to be slightly more awkward than Wilkinson's watercolor page 56, as well as Decker's reconstruction had previously illustrated, prompting the speculation that it may in fact belong to a separate figure than the one on the far right (west) as previously assumed. Unfortunately the condition of the fragment, both today and in Wilkenson's day may be such that we cannot resolve this issue, but regardless, the most important aspect of this scene in terms of understanding the entire composition, that this group of figures should be understood as moving towards the apse (eastward), has not changed. Important also from an art historical perspective, the new details of dress and accoutrements (for example the figure on the far right holds a *baculus*, a ceremonial staff carried in Roman ceremonial processions) lends new weight to the comparison between the Luxor paintings and other well known late Roman works of art such as the mosaics of Piazza Armerina in Sicily. In fact, the similarities between the images at the two sites may help to date more securely the Sicilian villa to the Tetrarchic era, a site that in some literature is dated to c. 350 CE.

The more comprehensive work carried out by the conservators this season focused on the apse, in which the monumental figures of the four Tetrarchs, Diocletian, Maximian, Constantius Chlorus and Galerius, are pictured. The cleaning of this section of the paintings revealed several new details previously unknown as well as clarified some aspects of the composition that were questionable about Wilkenson's drawings and Decker's reconstruction. The most striking revelation was the figure of an enormous eagle holding a bejeweled *corona civica* in the conch of the apse, a detail speculated by Deckers but which I had been skeptical about in previous seasons, unable to discern its

outline in the fragments prior to conservation. This image, a conventional symbol of Roman power and authority, lends an additional aura of imperial sanctity to the entire room and complements the solemn and formal depiction of the four emperors below. Notably, a contemporary parallel to the painted eagle can be found in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. On display there is a bronze eagle standing on a cornucopia which was found in Diocletian's fortress of Babylon (according to the museum label – a fact I hope to confirm at a later date). This eagle probably once stood upon an imperial Roman standard and attests to the ubiquitous use of this symbol by the legions of the Roman army in late antiquity, a fact known from textual sources but rarely confirmed in the material record.

Another interesting and important detail of the apse composition that was clarified by this season's conservation was the decisive determination that the apse contained no evidence of Christian symbolism. In Wilkenson's drawing on page 60 of his notebook, he had placed a cross within a rectangular panel on the far right (west) of the apse at the level of the rightmost Tetrarch's shoulder. The supposed placement of a cross in this section of painting was therefore interpreted as evidence for the conversion of the space into a church sometime after its initial conception. However, cleaning of this region revealed no evidence of a cross ever having been illustrated (Figure 1). Moreover, it revealed a few fragments of what looks to be the edges of a circular compositional element, just above the rectangular panel, possibly a portrait roundel like the one in the center of the apse composition which would have held a bust of Jupiter. My preliminary study of comparative material carried out at the Chicago House library over the last two weeks leads me to speculate that this rectangular panel and roundel may have in fact been

part of an imperial *signum*, containing the imperial coat of arms, or perhaps a portrait bust of one of the Tetrarch's patron deities. A painted representation of a *signum* of this kind exists at the aforementioned Piazza Armerina (Figure 2) and a sculpted relief version is known from Galerius' palace at Gamzigrad (Figure 3), but further study will hopefully unearth additional parallels.

The cleaning of the apse decoration revealed one surprise this season. Prior to conservation, it was discernable that the three preserved Tetrarchs (the fourth having been rubbed out in antiquity) each appeared to hold some sort of attribute of rule. The far left (probably Constantius Chlorus) was thought to have held a scroll in his left hand, the second from left (probably Diocletian) held a spear in his right hand and a *globus* in his left, and the rightmost figure (probably Galerius) was thought to have also held a scroll (cf. Wilkinson watercolor page 60). While cleaning confirmed the attributes of the two left hand figures, conservation revealed that the westernmost Tetrarch in fact held, at waist level, a branch of foliage. At first glance, this leaf appears to be a laurel branch, but Roman iconographical tradition usually depicts laurel leaves in pairs, connected as a crown. Such laurel crowns were awarded in military ceremonies to triumphant generals or emperors and were symbolic of triumph throughout Roman history. And indeed, numerous coins from the Tetrarchic era depict the emperors as laureate. However, single branches held by figures in Roman art are more commonly identified as palm leaves (symbolizing victory) or olive branches (symbolizing peace). In fact, palm leaves are found at Luxor decorating a column drum from the northwest tetrapylon, framing the inscriptions on the southeastern tetrapylon, and on an inscribed statue base which once held a statue of Maximian (discovered by Lacau in the second decade of the 20th century,

but forgotten until recently). Alternatively, a preliminary search of late Roman coin databases brought to light a silver *denarius* of Diocletian holding a olive branch with *Quies* on the reverse, minted to celebrate the emperor's retirement in 307 (Figure 4). Therefore, all three types of branches can be shown to be employed in the iconography of the late empire. In truth, the individual symbolism of any or all of these branches - Triumph, Victory or Peace - would be appropriate to evoke in the historical context of the late Roman renovations to the Luxor temple, but I would like to reserve specific identification until I am able to further research the iconography, or perhaps even consult a botanist.

Overall, the cleaning of the Tetrarchs in the apse has brought out the monumentality of the figures, and allowed for a better understanding of the figures' corporeality. Though the composition of the four Tetrarchs is certainly in keeping with formalized imperial depictions in the late empire in terms of the figures' formal poses and iconography, there is enough individuality to each figure and naturalism in their poses to overturn previous assumptions by art historians about Tetrarchic imagery. We can now say that depictions of the emperors in painting at least do not seem to be hampered by the over-stylization common to sculptural images, such as the famous porphyry statues now inserted into the Basilica of San Marco in Venice (Figure 5).

The cleaning of the apse images has also greatly improved the visibility of the images, such that even with the scaffolding blocking part of the composition, the enormous figures of the emperors can be seen as far away as the court of Rameses II. In this way, the true dramatic impact of the Roman paintings on the Luxor temple's aesthetics is once again brought to light.



Figure 2 (left) and Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5