

Dorman-led expedition produces reference study on temple in Luxor

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For the average person, a 300-square meter area may merely bring to mind a large apartment, but for historians and archeologists, such a space could contain a wealth of information, puzzles, and insights into a world long forgotten.

These forgotten narratives are exactly what an expedition led by AUB President Peter Dorman, who is also an acclaimed Egyptologist, set out to uncover when it headed to Luxor (ancient Thebes) to study the inner sanctuary of a modest temple that lies within the great Medinet Habu complex, whose history spans several millennia, from the Eighteenth Dynasty and up to the Christian era.

The Medinet Habu complex is an impressive architectural mortuary temple precinct that covers about 60,000 square meters. It is probably best known for the 7000 square meters of inscribed reliefs that adorn the vast funeral temple of Ramesses III, of the Nineteenth Dynasty. But now an earlier, more modest temple precinct dedicated to the god Amun has been studied by the Epigraphic Survey of the University of Chicago, where Dorman spent close to nine years leading the Survey and five years chairing the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.

The inner sanctuaries of the temple of Amun date back to the Eighteenth Dynasty (1550-1292 BC) and occupy a 300-square-meter space.

For the average tourist, it probably takes just fifteen minutes to visit such an area, but for Dorman's team of epigraphers, it took six years of painstaking work to record and study all the artwork and reliefs present in those sanctuaries.

The outcome: a massive 10-kg volume of 150 plates with a 92-page guidebook and commentary that will act as reference to scholars and students alike. Released at the end of 2009, *Medinet Habu IX. The Eighteenth Dynasty Temple, Part I: The Inner Sanctuaries* is edited by Dorman and published by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. There are already 500 copies in print, and a pdf version can be downloaded from the Institute's web site.

Each of the 150 plates included in the reference book was the result of teamwork between a photographer, several artists, and epigraphers. The artist would draw directly onto enlarged prints as a drawing surface, and the epigraphers would make meticulous corrections.

"You cannot reproduce the detailed artwork of a ten-meter wall except by using concise methods of image capture," explained Dorman.

The temple under study was decorated on the orders of Queen Hatshepsut, who was the fifth pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty and also the wife of Thutmose II, who died only a few years after becoming king without leaving a direct heir to the throne.

Thutmose III, Hatshepsut's stepson and nephew, was apparently too young to assume kingship at the time. As a result, Hatshepsut was first appointed as queen regent, and then assumed power several years later, claiming to be the legitimate heir to the throne and serving as co-ruler to the young Thutmose III. Hatshepsut has long intrigued archeologists and historians because she portrayed herself as a male pharaoh, on all her royal monuments. The only Egyptian woman to reign in the guise of a man, she also enjoyed the longest rule among all the female rulers of ancient Egypt. Twenty years after her death, however, Thutmose III undertook to re-carve her monuments and to erase any trace of her reign as king, either by removing her image entirely or altering her royal name and replacing it with that of her husband

or father, Thutmosis I.

The six-year effort led by Dorman at the small temple has helped historians better understand the reign of Hatshepsut and the role she played with Thutmosis III through the study of the reliefs of the temple and by examining what the decoration and later re-carvings mean. For instance, epigraphers have noted that the posthumous changes in decoration were not undertaken out of spite or at random, but with a consistent plan to re-dedicate sacred spaces in a manner consistent with the worship of Amun throughout the Theban region.

"It's necessary to document these ancient temples in as much detail as possible, so they can be studied in a facsimile version by scholars in years to come," Dorman said, in an interview at his AUB office, as he pored over the massive volume. "There is an urgent need to record monuments that are currently standing, as they are threatened by tourism, rising ground water, overpopulation."

Dorman added that the goal of epigraphy was not to reproduce everything on the walls, including the damage, but only to depict the original carvings as accurately as possible while omitting irrelevant detail, as one might edit an architectural manuscript.

Dorman's expedition, the Epigraphic Survey, was founded by James Henry Breasted, the "father of American Egyptology," in 1924. It is still the longest-running seasonal expedition anywhere in the Middle East. In fact, AUB has a historic connection to the Epigraphic Survey, since, in 1924, its first director, Harold Nelson, was hired away from the University's Department of History by Breasted himself. It has taken only eighty-four years for a Survey director to return to Beirut.