

## The recent excavation and restoration works at the Ramesseum



Colosse fracassé de Ramsès II.

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**18th May 2011 at 11h00**

**University of Sadat City, near Cairo**

Conférence de Christian Leblanc

Since 1991, the Temple of Millions of Years of Ramses II, at Thebes West, knows a renewed interest. The excavations undertaken within its area and at its periphery, as well as the works of restoration and valuation conducted by the Franco-Egyptian teams of the MAFTO (CNRS) and the CEDAE (Supreme Council of Antiquities), have seriously participated in this renewal of knowledge that we must have expected for one of the most prestigious monuments of the West Bank. That is first, for a better understanding of the Ramesseum's history, its liturgical functioning, as well as its economical organisation and its administrative management, that many researches have been started up on the *temenos* and in the buildings made of mud bricks, thus forming its outbuildings. The only aim of this paper is to briefly explain the ongoing studies and analysis and their results accumulated during these last years.

*The First Pylon of the Temple.* The researches carried out on the collapsed pylon have permitted to come on a safeguard project that will be however long and costly. Based on the preliminary

geotechnical report established in 2000, many options today take shape for the future restoration of this monumental gate. However they necessitate major complementary analysis and studies that must be implemented with the participation of specialised laboratories and institutes. Since a short time, a team of engineers work already, helped by powerful scanners, on the modelling of the building and which results look promising. On the other hand, the technical reasons of its collapse are still to be clarified even if some appealing assumptions have been suggested. Their verification on the site is a must as it will affect any intervention on the structure. From the historical point of view, the collapse of the pylon does not seem to have significantly evolved with time as suggested by the documentation available since the end of the XVIIIth century. Moreover, other observations, such as the disappearance of the fallen blocks of the eastern side of the northern tower, incite us to think that the destruction of this magnificent gate goes back to a very old date. The fact to notice that many parts of the temple have been entirely dismantled and reutilized somewhere else supposes that the Ramesseum should have been used as a quarry since the Third Intermediate Period and, particularly, by the end of the Ptolemaic Epoch and during the two first centuries of the Roman Era. Many courses of its walls, columns and pillars have been found notably at the Western Thebes in the construction of late temples.

*First Court: the Great Colossus of Ramses II.* The colossus of Ramses II that was standing long ago in the first court of the temple has also been the object of an archaeological study and geotechnical analysis. The identification, registration and classification of almost 600 fragments found *in-situ*, have first revealed that, contrarily to what was thought till now, this monumental royal statue of 18m height has not been destroyed by an earthquake. Cut into several pieces and then knocked-down few time later, the "Ozymandias" that Shelley had sung in one of his well known poems was, in fact, the victim of a human action that goes back probably to the first times of the Christianity. In the perspective of the project of the virtual restitution of the Ramesseum, a 3D modelling of the colossus has been carried out, with the participation of the INSIGHT (USA), and from the most significant fragments. The partial assembling made till now is not really to the advantage of the monolith specially that, when destroyed, the face of « Ramses Sun of the Princes » has been completely and voluntarily erased. This mutilation, that David Roberts refused to see in his lithography of 1838 inspired by the romantic imagination, had been however observed some decades before by André Dutertre at the time of the Bonaparte Campaign.

Always in the context of the first court, our work has permitted to recognize the presence of a second monumental statue, also monolithic, but this one belongs to the mother of the king. Its discovery on the site comes today to confirm the description of Diodorus of Sicily about the "Tomb of Ozymandias", who had mentioned its existence. The colossus of Touy, placed on a pedestal was almost 9m high and representing the queen staying, wearing a sheath dress and, on her head, a heavy braided wig covered by a vulture skin. Doubtless destroyed at the same period as the colossus of Ramses II, the image of Touy took place originally at the south of the one of her son and not at the north of the axial door leading to the second court as suggested by G. Perrot and Ch. Chipiez in their *History of the Art in the Antiquity*, published in 1882.

*The Sector of the Sanctuary.* At the end of the temple itself, the foundations of the sanctuary and its lateral out-buildings have been cleared between 1997 and 2002. These excavations made on an area of almost 1,800m<sup>2</sup> have made to reappear, in negative, the plans of these buildings that were arranged on both sides of the "Holy-of-Holies". It was of squared plan and provided originally with 4 pillars, it was preceded by a hypostyle hall and surrounded by many chapels and two complexes: one solar, at the north, and the other one, chthonian or sokarian, at the south. No structure in elevation of the whole buildings is still existing, except some rare remains of paving or bases of pillars. The architectural plotting that has been established should permit to work on the restitution to ground of this sector of the Ramesseum in order to complete the readability of its plan.

*The Northern Processional Way.* At the northern periphery, an important work carried out since 1994 is at the origin of many and unexpected discoveries. The new exploration of the chapel said of the « White Queen », prospected in the past by W. Flinders Petrie, has finally revealed that this building goes back to the reign of Amenhotep IV, and that its plan was composed of a double vaulted building of mud-bricks, preceded by a court to which the access was by a ramp. In this same sector, but between the two surrounding walls of the Ramesseum, the researches have brought to the fore the remains of the processional way that was lined at this side by a double row of jackal-sphinxes lying on chapels and set on large rectangular pedestals. A beautiful head of Anubis represented in this animal shape has been discovered at the bottom of a deep funerary shaft where it had been thrown long time later. It has to be added to the numerous fragments collected in this space. Since 2010, a part of the north processional way is presented to the visitors of the temple.

*The Kitchens and Bakeries of the Temple.* On the southern side, running along a lateral circulation way, two groups of collapsed mud-bricks constructions have been entirely excavated. These constructions belonging to the huge economico-administrative complex of the Ramesseum have been identified: they are the royal kitchens and bakeries to which an intendant's house was associated. In the two symmetrical units composed by the kitchens-bakeries, more than thirty halls, each one provided with two to five ovens have been explored, delivering hundreds of pottery bread-moulds, pots, small dishes and other containers. Still active during the reign of Ramses III and, doubtless, much later, these pantries were incontestably serving the needs of the liturgies but also were providing a part of the food ration ? specially bread, cakes, meat, fat, oil and beer ? distributed as salaries to the royal employees and craftsmen working on the West Bank.

*The School of the Temple.* Between 2002 and 2005 our researches were spread toward the south-east, in a perimeter located *roughly* between the kitchens and the royal palace, that's to say on the sector where J.E. Quibell had discovered many ostraca. When clearing a large part of this space that was covered by heaps of rubble, we found important remains of structures belonging to a building built all in length, some walls of which were discovered by E. Baraize in the past. The part now excavated

of this establishment covers an area estimated to approx. 700m<sup>2</sup>. It comprises notably seventeen units or cells of small or medium dimensions separated with partitions or mud-brick walls. Many of the bricks are stamped with the name of the Temple of Millions of Years of Ramses II. Conserved at a levelled status, these installations are preceded, at the East, by a kind of esplanade or terrace of forty meter length by seven meter width and which surface had been visibly levelled in order to disguise the geological irregularities of the ground. It was carpeted with a *dakka* or a layer of packed down earth. A façade wall that, as it seems, had doors only at its two ends was permitting to accede from the closed and covered complex to open sky esplanade. If the doorsteps of many doors permitted the reconstitution of the circulation between the different installations, however it appears that the building was divided into two semi-detached parts simply separated by a blind wall.

Besides the bringing to light of these structures, the excavation has also permitted to collect, till now, one hundred fifty ostraca on pottery shards and limestone. Most of them (pottery shards with inscriptions on one or two sides) are literary texts in hieratic, sometimes of clumsy writing; the others (limestone shards) are hieroglyphic writing exercises ? notably lines with the sign-*nb* ? or rough drafts of sculpture apprentices. If a major part of this material has been found within the cells, not less than about thirty of these documents strewed the ground of the terrace of the building. The study of the literary ostraca has already permitted to identify fragments of *the Satire of Trades* or *Teaching of Kheti* (or Douaouf), *the Hymn of the Nile*, *the Teaching of Amenemhat Ist to his Son*, models of letters and the *Kemyt*, a kind of school manual written in columns, which usage, for the pupils learning the handwriting art, seems to go back to the XIth dynasty.

As confirmed by these discoveries, the ruins of the complex that we have just found in the south-east quarter of the temple of Ramses II are quite sure of a school, the only one localised until now on the site ground, after the double building brought to light by J.D.S. Pendlebury, at 400m from the big temple of Tell El-Amarna, that stamped bricks had designated as « House of Life ». First one to be identified in the context of the Temple of Millions of Years at Western Thebes, the school of the Ramesseum was certainly not the only one on the West Bank. If the pupils learned there to read and write, and were educated in literature from classical works, other subjects were also taught such as drawing, sculpture and painting arts.

*The Restoration Works and Site Management.* Parallel to the exploration of the different sectors of the temple, the works in the second court were for the restoration of the walls and the porticos adorned with imposing osiride colossi of the king, as well as the regularisation of the antique paving that had been removed in the past. Two staircases permitting the access to the great hypostyle hall have been also rebuilt and, in order to ensure to the visitors a better readability of the formerly built space, wall columns, pillars that have disappeared on the surface but not in the foundation, have been rebuilt on one or two layers. Other actions that have aimed to protect and to set off the monumental statuary : in 1997, the « Young Memnon » has been placed on a new base, heighy of which

corresponds to the assumed level of its original pedestal. More recently, a magnificent head of Ramses II that was lying on the ground of the second court, has been installed on a pedestal and consolidated.

A long term work has been undertaken in the large hypostyle hall for the fill-in of the joints, the restoration of the coating, as well as the cleaning, by micro-abrasion process, of the columns and the relief whose colours had been hidden by the dust of the centuries.

In the dependencies built with mud-bricks, we had also to work in order to protect these fragile structures, most of the times very damaged and, subject from time to time to torrential floods. The most adequate solution in this case was to cover the antique walls with some layers of modern mud-bricks and, to indicate this additional part of the elevation by a light prominence. To ensure an aesthetical character to this protection, we deemed it preferable to follow the form of the collapsed structure rather than to make the restoration too much stiff by imposing a regular elevation to the whole building. The works carried out in the sector of the kitchens, the bakeries and the intendency of the temple show that we can reach a satisfactory result that, moreover, has the advantage of being reversible. However, the solutions are not easy when we have to protect antique vaults built with the same perishable material. In the stores of the Ramesseum, E. Baraize had particularly resolved the problem at the beginning of the XXth century by reinforcing the vaults with metallic or brick arches. This system is still efficient and does not harm the aesthetics of the architecture but needs today to be spread on other stores of the temple. It is a matter of priority of which we are very aware and it has been put in the programme since 2008.