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Simon Connor, Aiman Ashmawy Ali, Dietrich Raue

Beheaded, Burnt, and Buried: A Deposit of Royal Statue Fragments in the Temple of Heliopolis

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# Beheaded, Burnt, and Buried: A Deposit of Royal Statue Fragments in the Temple of Heliopolis

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SIMON CONNOR, AIMAAN ASHMAWY, DIETRICH RAUE\*

## ABSTRACT

In 2022, two successive excavation campaigns by the Egyptian-German mission focused on the area surrounding the museum of Matariya, which collects the monumental pieces discovered on the archaeological site of Heliopolis around the obelisk of Senusret I. These excavations unearthed the massive limestone block foundations of a Late Period temple, as well as a limestone pavement that once covered the temple forecourt. A preserved part of this pavement to the south of the obelisk of Senusret I revealed a deposit of fragments of statues and cult objects from the Middle and New Kingdoms, buried in the Late Period. The fragments belong almost exclusively to the heads of sphinxes, which seem to have been ritually broken and burnt before being buried, perhaps reflecting a practice of deactivating the statues accompanying their decapitation before the reuse of their bodies.

**Keywords:** Heliopolis, Matariya, Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom, Late Period, Senusret III, Amenemhat IV, Amenemhat-Sobekhotep, Amenemhat V, Thutmose III, Amenhotep III, Ramesses II, Psametik I, deposit, favissa, cachette.

\* Simon Connor: Ifao, scientific member; Aiman Ashmawy: Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, head of the Egyptian Antiquities Sector; Dietrich Raue: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, director.

## RÉSUMÉ

En 2022, deux campagnes successives de fouille de la mission égypto-allemande se sont concentrées sur la zone entourant le musée de Matariya, qui rassemble autour de l'obélisque de Sésostris I<sup>er</sup> les pièces monumentales trouvées sur le site archéologique d'Héliopolis. Ces fouilles ont mis au jour les fondations en blocs de calcaire massifs d'un temple de la Basse Époque, ainsi qu'un dallage en calcaire qui couvrait jadis le parvis du temple. Une partie conservée de ce dallage au sud de l'obélisque de Sésostris I<sup>er</sup> a révélé un dépôt de fragments de statues et d'objets culturels du Moyen et du Nouvel Empire, enterrés à la Basse Époque. Les fragments appartiennent presque exclusivement à des têtes de sphinx, qui semblent avoir été rituellement brisées et brûlées, avant d'être enterrées, peut-être reflet d'une pratique de désactivation des statues accompagnant leur décapitation avant remploi de leurs corps.

**Mots-clés :** Héliopolis, Matariya, Moyen Empire, Nouvel Empire, Basse Époque, Sésostris III, Amenemhat IV, Amenemhat-Sobekhotep, Amenemhat V, Thoutmosis III, Amenhotep III, Ramsès II, Psammétique I<sup>er</sup>, dépôt, favissa, cachette.

## 1. EXPLORING THE SURROUNDINGS OF SENUSRET I'S OBELISK<sup>1</sup>

In the early 20th century, William Flinders Petrie excavated the area south-east of the remaining obelisk of Senusret I at the archaeological site of ancient Heliopolis, Matariya. Petrie investigated “half of a field” and reached the sand level of the *gezira* (the natural hill on which the site was built). According to Petrie, the cleared area was backfilled and returned to the farmers following the excavation.<sup>2</sup> His workmen discovered over twenty fragments of at least one granite obelisk in this sector. The hieroglyphs on the obelisk's central column featured the name of Thutmosis III, while the names of Ramesses II adorned the two lateral columns. Among these fragments, there were also quartzite and limestone blocks, as well as three statue heads.

One of these heads is a fragment of a sphinx that can be dated to the 13th Dynasty for stylistic reasons (Fig. 1). This head is now part of the collection at the August-Kestner Museum in Hannover (inv. 1935.200.128).<sup>3</sup> It is made of a black stone, probably a variety of granodiorite, but it possesses a peculiar aspect with yellowish and reddish veins, as well as cracks, which may have resulted from exposure to fire. Let us bear this peculiarity in mind since we will encounter other witnesses of burnt statues in the framework of this article. This head was not

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Mouna Mounayer for her English revision. Any errors of language remain the responsibility of the authors of this article.

<sup>2</sup> It was not possible to retrieve information concerning the precise location of this “half field” excavated by Petrie. The area surrounding the obelisk was then used for agriculture (see DIETZE, UGLIANO 2022, p. 6, fig. 6). It is only known that the trench(es) reached the enclosure wall/embankment. Cf. PETRIE, MACKEY 1915, pp. 5–6; PM IV, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> The head was acquired by the museum in 1935. It was previously part of the collection of the Egyptologist Friedrich Wilhelm von Bissing. It is not known under what circumstances he bought the head (CONNOR 2020, pp. 137, 315, pl. 88; 2021, pp. 88–90, fig. 6.18).

simply broken: its front part (nose, mouth, and chin) was clearly cut or sawed off, and its upper part was likely subjected to the same treatment. It is difficult to determine from this fragment whether these intentional cuts were made before or after the fire.

The second head, the current whereabouts of which have not yet been identified, belongs to another royal statue from the Thutmosid Period.<sup>4</sup>

The third is the face of a greywacke statue from the Late Period. It was bestowed upon the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1912 by the Egyptian Research Account and British School of Archaeology in Egypt (inv. 12.187.31).<sup>5</sup>

The archaeological context of these three heads is not clearly documented. It was likely unclear even during the original excavation, as a recent exploration of the same area in Autumn 2022 has revealed. The sector south of the obelisk suffered heavy disturbances, first during Late Antiquity when the site was extensively dismantled, and in much later times when canals were dug for irrigation and agriculture. These later activities, in particular, disrupted the entire stratigraphy of the area. Nevertheless, a new exploration of this area led by the Egyptian-German mission in 2022 revealed new elements that shed light on the context in which Petrie may have found these artefacts.

During two consecutive seasons of excavation (Spring and Autumn 2022), the mission conducted investigations in the vicinity of the open-air museum of Matariya, which surrounds the still-standing obelisk of Senusret I (Figs. 2–3):

- Area 211, located west of the museum, exposed the foundations of the eastern part of a Late Period temple, made of massive limestone blocks;
- Area 212, situated north of the museum, despite significant disturbances in Late Antiquity, yielded a series of mudbrick structures from the 1st millennium BC;
- Area 214, positioned south of the museum and also subjected to considerable disturbances, still contained remnants of a pavement that likely dates to the Third Intermediate Period. Additionally, a “cachette” or sacred deposit was discovered beneath the slabs, believed to have been placed there during the Late Period. This deposit contained numerous fragments of sculptures, which will be the focus of this article.



FIG. 1. Head of the 13th Dynasty king found south of the obelisk during Petrie's excavation (Hannover 1935.200.128).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> RAUE 1999, p. 398, No. XVIII-XX-5.8.

<sup>5</sup> Views concerning the dating of this piece vary. See BOTHMER, DE MEULENAERE, MÜLLER 1960, p. 59 (26th Dynasty, probably Apries); JOSEPHSON 1995, pp. 5–15 (probably Ptolemy II); STANWICK 2002, pp. 19, 68, 71, 104, no. A 37 (end of 4th or 3rd century BC). See also the museum's website page: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/548230?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=heliopolis&offset=0&rpp=40&pos=1> (accessed on 17th March 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, photographs and drawings are by Simon Connor.



The entire area (average altitude 14.0–14.5 m) is covered by a two-metre thick layer of dark brown soil. This soil primarily consists of loam deposits from the lake that once occupied the central part of the site within the ancient Heliopolis precinct, spanning from medieval times to the nineteenth century. On the entire site within the temenos, this thick layer of loam is generally very homogenous and contains almost no material, not even pottery sherds. The archaeological ground, at an average altitude of 12.0–12.5 m, typically ranges between 0.5 and 2 m in thickness. The archaeological layer(s) cover the sand of the *gezira*, which in this area of the site is at an altitude of 9.03–10.13 m according to the drillings that were done.



FIG. 2. General map of the areas excavated during Autumn Season 2022.

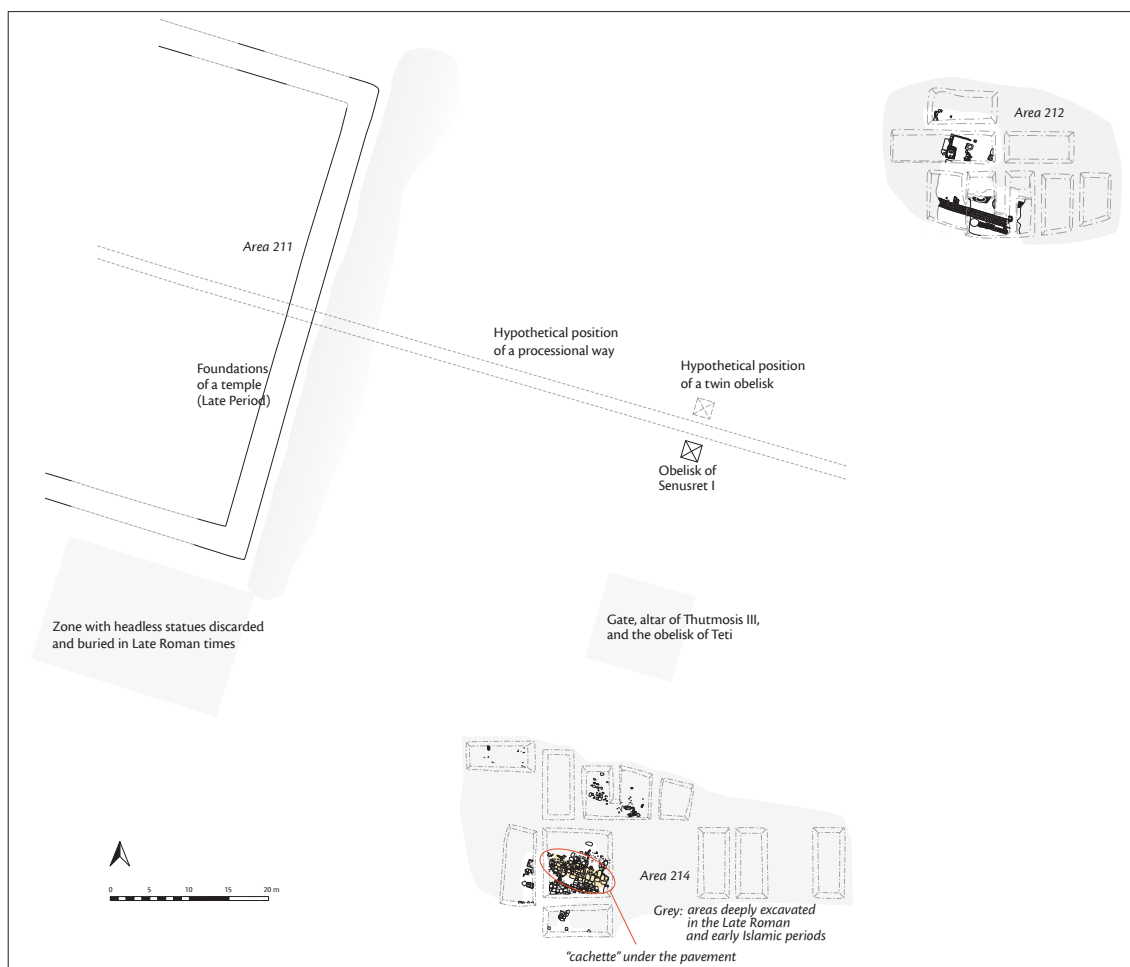


FIG. 3. Surroundings of the obelisk of Senusret I and excavated areas 211, 212 and 214. From Ashmawy et al. 2023, fig. 2.

## 2. UNCOVERING THE MASSIVE STONE FOUNDATIONS OF A LATE PERIOD TEMPLE

The excavation conducted along the western side of the open-air museum (Area 211, see Figs. 2–3) revealed massive limestone block foundations forming the eastern part of a large, apparently rectangular building. These foundations comprised three perpendicular walls. The ceramics and various inscribed objects found in association with these foundations suggest that the building dates to the 26th Dynasty.<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that the walls of this temple are oriented to NW-SE. This information is important because the structures uncovered to the east of the temple, which are the focus of this article (zones 212 and 214), follow the same orientation.

The interior of the temple, or the courtyard enclosed by the three massive foundation walls, was filled with a thick layer of crushed limestone. This suggests, according to the ceramic material found associated with it, that the site underwent large-scale destruction and quarrying activities during Late Antiquity to the Ottoman period.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The study of this area is currently being conducted by Florence Langermann (Leipzig University). For a preliminary report on the excavation of these massive stone foundations and some photographs of the material found within this precinct, see ASHMAWY et al. 2023.

<sup>8</sup> The material found within this temple or courtyard, enclosed by these massive walls, is currently being studied by Florence Langermann (Leipzig University).

### 3. A CEMETERY OF HEADLESS SPHINXES

The area south of the southern massive foundation wall yielded a significant number of statue remains. Among these sculpture fragments, the bodies of around 30 sphinxes were found, almost all headless. These sphinxes, made of quartzite, granite, and granodiorite, were found in a secondary (or possibly even tertiary or quaternary) context. They were buried in pits cut during Roman to Late Roman times, mixed with the aforementioned layer of crushed limestone. This indicates that they were buried during the dismantlement and exploitation of the site as large-scale quarries.

All statues found in this context date from the 12th to the 19th Dynasties.<sup>9</sup>

### 4. THE LEGACY OF CENTURIES OF QUARRYING

During the autumn 2022 excavation season, the Egyptian-German mission excavated nine 9×5 m trenches to the north of the open-air museum (Area 212 on the map, see Figs. 3–4). Due to the nature of the soil (2 to 3 metres of loam covering the archaeological remains) and the high-water table, extensive excavation was not possible. Instead, the work had to be conducted in successive trenches, requiring substantial water pumping. Very few archaeological remains were found in this section of the site (particularly to the east), which had evidently undergone disturbances over various periods, including deep cuts, trenches, and pits. These disturbances were likely a result of intense quarrying activities from Late Antiquity onwards, as well as more recent agricultural practises. Notably, Islamic pottery and Ottoman coins were even found at depths of two to three metres below the present ground surface, i.e., at a level where other trenches yielded material from the Old and New Kingdoms.<sup>10</sup>

In the preserved part of the archaeological ground, the lowest accessible layers revealed evidence of Ramesside occupation based on the found ceramics. However, no associated structure was discovered (see Fig. 5). During the Late Period, the Ramesside occupation layer was covered by a series of successive floors made of indurated white *mouna*. Subsequently, a mudbrick wall running in a NW-SE direction was built on top of it (depicted on the left of the drawing, Fig. 5), following the same orientation as the massive stone foundation wall of the temple in area 211 (see above). Ceramics beneath this straight mudbrick wall were dated from the late 26th Dynasty to the Persian period (represented in blue in Trench D on the map, Fig. 4). Insufficient evidence remains to definitively determine the type of structure to which it belonged. Nevertheless, within the same archaeological layer and continuing the same orientation, the excavation revealed the remains of a light stone foundation comprising a single layer of small limestone blocks arranged in rows. These foundations belonged to two small rectangular structures located 10 metres north of the mudbrick wall.

<sup>9</sup> See ASHMAWY et al. 2023. As mentioned in this article, many of the sphinxes were clearly cut in the past, and shaped as blocks probably for reuse in a wall.

<sup>10</sup> In this area of the site, the modern surface level is approximately at an altitude of 14.00 to 14.30 metres. The upper archaeological layer is typically found beneath two metres of loam, at an altitude of 12.00–12.20 metres. The sand of the gezira is reached at a depth of one metre, at an altitude of 11.00 m.

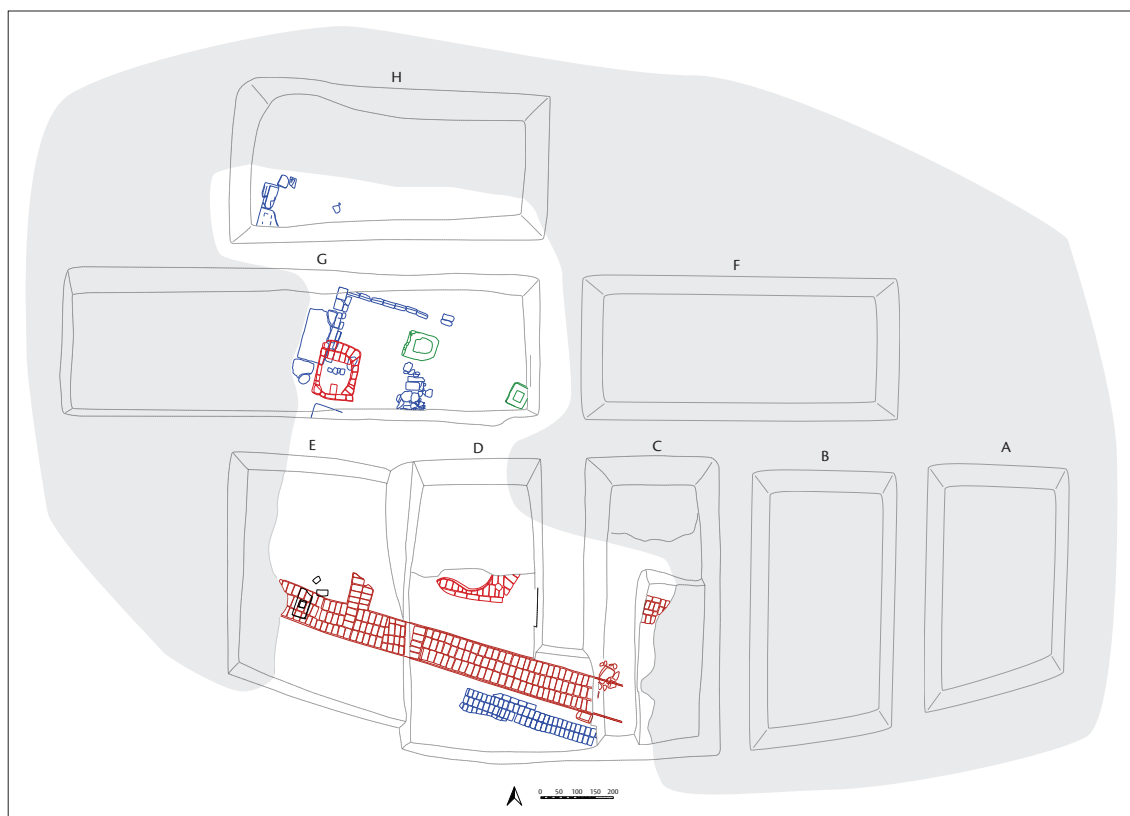


FIG. 4. Map of Area 212, illustrating the eight trenches excavated during the Autumn Season 2022. The grey areas indicate locations where deep cuts were dug during the Late Roman or Islamic Periods, resulting in the removal of all earlier archaeological layers.

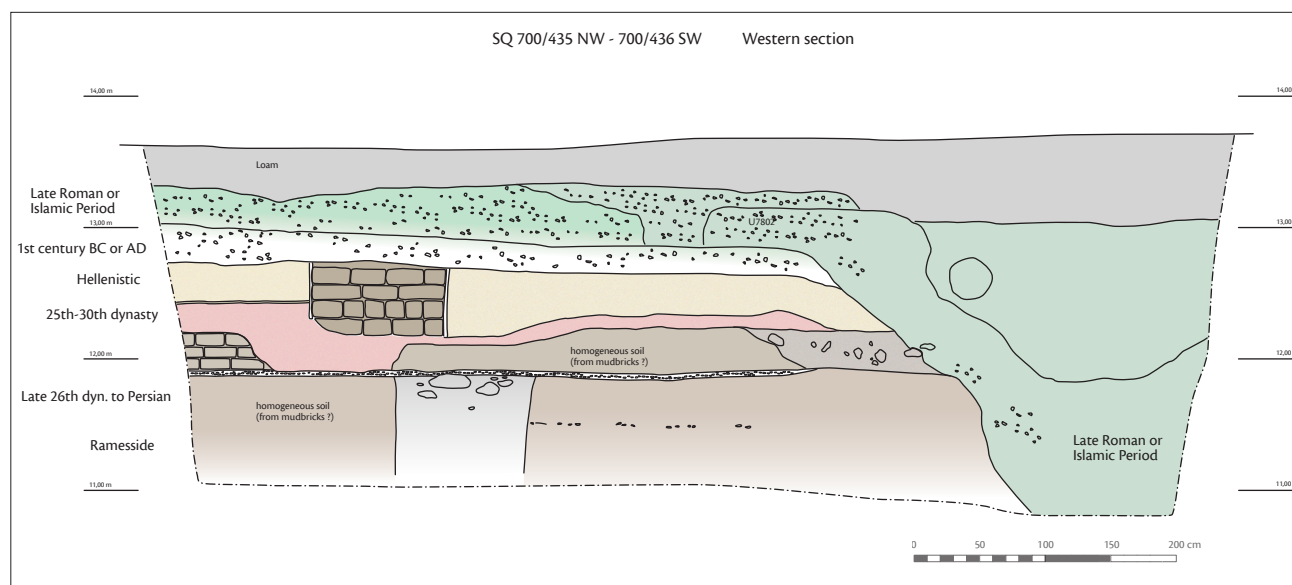


FIG. 5. Western section of trench SQ 700/435NW – 700/436SW (Trench C on the map).



In Trench SQ 699/436N (referred to as Trench G on the map), two preserved perpendicular wall foundations formed a room that would have measured 3 metres (N-S) by at least 2.5 metres (W-E). An incised groove runs in a line along the entire length of the upper face of the small stone blocks. If this structure is indeed the foundation of an actual building, it likely comprised lightweight, possibly organic materials, unless it served solely as a symbolic delineation of space. The arrangement of these perpendicular rows of small limestone blocks does not indicate their use as a boundary for a basin. This structure was installed directly atop a homogeneous ground composed of reddish indurated soil. On the western side of this structure, there is a more massive block that potentially served as a threshold. However, no door-pivot was cut into the block (Fig. 6). In the adjacent trench to the north, a few blocks with similar orientation suggest the presence of a second structure of the same type.

Later, during the Late Period, these first structures were apparently dismantled and covered by a layer of soil and sand that served as a foundation ground for new installations. On the layer of soil, two limestone blocks were discovered (Fig. 7). One showed the remains of a Ramesside relief depicting a king wearing the *khat* and facing left. It was vertically pierced, likely indicating its reuse for some (industrial?) activity. Another undecorated block, pierced in the same way, was found three meters to the east at the same level.

Later again, on top of the aforementioned layer, new mudbrick walls were built, maintaining the same orientation as the previous ones (marked in red in the drawing). However, these later walls are not sufficiently preserved to allow for the reconstruction of the shape and function of the structure(s) to which they belonged. Despite this limitation, the dating provided by the pottery material found in the foundation trenches (early Roman) and the orientation of the walls suggest their association with the main temple located 60 metres to the west. Additionally, they appear to be associated with at least two circular mudbrick structures (ovens?) built on the ground. Based on the pottery discovered in proximity to the highest walking surface preserved between some walls, it appears that they remained in use until the early Roman period.



FIG. 6. Trench SQ 699/436N (= Trench G on the map). Rectangular stone structure, oriented NW-SE, dated to the early phase of the Late Period.



FIG. 7. Trench SQ 699/436N (= Trench G on the map). Detail of the two blocks (highlighted in green on the plan) pierced and reused for some industrial (?) activity during the first half of the Late Period.

## 5. AREA 214: EXPLORING SOUTH OF THE OPEN-AIR MUSEUM

During the Spring season, another area south of the museum (Area 214) was investigated. Although no walls were revealed, this area provided valuable information that contributes to our understanding of the appearance of this particular site area and the sequence of events that occurred. Twelve trenches were excavated (Fig. 8). The archaeological ground in the three easternmost trenches exhibited a similar state of poor preservation as observed in Area 212. It was evident that canals and pits had been cut and subsequently filled with loam, indicating repeated activity over time that cut through all ancient layers to a significant depth, even reaching the sand of the *gezira*. Could this be the location of the “half field” excavated by Petrie, where the three royal heads and several fragments of an obelisk were discovered? It is likely, as evidenced by the absence of any material from the limestone chip layer arising from the site’s quarrying during the Late Roman Period in these three trenches.

Moving to the north-west area, which was covered by Trenches 4 to 7 (see Fig. 8), it was also apparent that deep disturbances had occurred. Trench 4 and most of Trench 5 contained only dark loam from the surface to the bottom. However, in the south-west corner of Trench 5, a few fragmentary quartzite blocks appeared in the mud. The adjacent trenches to the west (6, 7, and 8) were less disturbed, and much of the crushed limestone “destruction layer” was preserved, reflecting the large-scale block chipping activity that occurred in this area (see Fig. 9). In addition, numerous chips of hard stones, typically grouped by type (quartzite, granodiorite, and granite) were found. Most of these lacked a polished surface, and must have once belonged to the inner part of architectural blocks or statues.



**FIG. 8.** The twelve trenches excavated in Area 214, located south of the open-air museum of Matariya. Satellite view of the background.





**FIG. 9.** Trench 694/428E (trench 6 on Fig. 8). The stratigraphy in this trench is particularly clear. A thick layer of loam covers a layer of crushed limestone mixed with soil and chips of quartzite and granite, the result of large-scale and likely well-organised dismantling and quarrying of the site during the Late Roman Period.

Among these stone chips, two carved fragments stood out. The first fragment (U8109-2, Fig. 10)<sup>11</sup> is a quartzite piece with carefully carved motifs on its polished side. In sunken relief, it depicts the body and tail of a bird of prey with outstretched wings. This motif is commonly found on the ceiling of the central axis of a temple, or on the underside of a lintel. The modest size of the motif suggests the fragment is part of the lintel of a small monument, perhaps a naos, rather than an architectural structure.

The second remarkable piece (U7951-2, Fig. 11)<sup>12</sup> belonged to a much larger monument. It is a granite fragment with one flat and polished surface, featuring a monumental inscription carved in sunken relief. The inscription depicts the upper part of a double crown positioned beneath two hieroglyphic signs of the sky. One sign is cut deeply, while the other appears more superficially carved. The juxtaposition of these two identical signs, varying in depth, suggests that they belonged to two adjacent columns of large-scale hieroglyphs.

A notable parallel can be drawn with New Kingdom obelisks, where a central column is typically carved deeper than the lateral ones, which are often added later. The difference in depth between the two aligned celestial signs can be observed on the upper part of the two obelisks at



**FIG. 10.** Quartzite fragment [U8109-2].

<sup>11</sup> Dimensions: H. 8.9; W. 7.9 cm.

<sup>12</sup> Dimensions: H. 45; W. 48.7 cm.





FIG. 11. Granite fragment [U7951-2] from an obelisk (?).

Luxor Temple, as well as on the Flaminio obelisk in Rome. If this comparison is valid and the proportions are similar, it is possible that this fragment could well belong to the upper part of one of the largest obelisks ever discovered in Egypt, potentially exceeding a height of 30 m. This newly found piece aligns well with Petrie's collection of obelisk fragments, which includes a central column belonging to Thutmosis III flanked by two lateral columns carved for Ramesses II.

Two sculpture fragments were discovered among the layer of limestone chips left after the Late Roman Period. One fragment is the rear part of a small sphinx<sup>13</sup> made from a block of granodiorite with a reddish vein of granite (U7951-3, Fig. 12). The inscribed base bears the name of Ramesses VII (1136-1129 BC). This sculpture serves as the second testament to the activities of this king in Heliopolis, as evidenced by the construction, during his reign, of a tomb and a cult chapel for a Mnevis bull in Arab el-Tawila, situated northwest of the precinct of Heliopolis.<sup>14</sup>

The sculpture repertoire of Heliopolis has also yielded another example of a sphinx with similar small dimensions.<sup>15</sup> Like the sphinxes discovered in the Karnak cachette,<sup>16</sup> these two small sphinxes were found buried or abandoned in a secondary context, leading to various

<sup>13</sup> Dimensions: H. 10.5; W. 10.7; L. 16.1 cm.

<sup>14</sup> KAMAL 1903, pp. 29–37: first dated to Ramesses III, then re-dated to Ramesses VII by G. DARESSY (1919, pp. 211–217). See RAUE 1999, pp. 34, 97, 102, 106–107, 131, 384–388. Apart from this exceptional monument in the Mnevis bull necropolis, two statues of this king are known from Karnak (Cairo JE 37595 and JE 29252 = CG 552), along with his unfinished tomb KV I.

<sup>15</sup> See the small human-handed sphinx of Merenptah found in 2017 (ASHMAWY, RAUE (eds.) 2024, pp. 292–303). See also the small steatite sphinx of Merenra (Edinburgh 1984.405), of unknown provenance but perhaps from Heliopolis due to its dedication to “The god who is lord of the Great Mansion” (i.e., Re of Heliopolis) (ARNOLD 1999, pp. 436–437).

<sup>16</sup> See the small sphinxes of Amenhotep I (calcite-alabaster, Alexandria National Museum, ex-Cairo CG 42033), Thutmosis III (calcite-alabaster, Alexandria National Museum, ex-Cairo CG 42070), Amenhotep II (sandstone Cairo CG 42079), Amenhotep III (faïence, Cairo CG 42088), Horemheb (faïence and gold, Luxor Museum J. 943, ex-Cairo CG 42096), Ramesses II (crystalline limestone, Cairo CG 42146), Shabaka (faïence, Cairo JE 37067), all measuring under 50 cm in length and most of them made of valuable materials. For bibliographical references about these statues, see the website of the Karnak cachette (<https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/>). See also the small calcite-alabaster sphinx of Tutankhamun from the Luxor Temple cachette (now in Luxor Museum) and, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, two faïence sphinxes of unknown provenance (Amenhotep III,

hypotheses concerning their use(s) and function(s). Their format precludes them from playing an architectural role within the open spaces of the temple. They are not, however, small enough to be incorporated into a “temple model” like the one of Sethy I found at Tell el-Yahudiya (now in the Brooklyn Museum, inv. 49.183), which will be discussed later in this article. Their portability suggests that they may have had (or were designed to have) varied uses over time, depending on the occasions for which they were intended.

In architectural contexts, sphinxes typically function as pairs of statues facing each other, framing passages that provide access to sacred spaces, like gates and dromoi. It is possible that these small versions were placed in niches located within the width of pylons, similar to the niches visible on the 7th pylon in Karnak. However, this remains unverifiable. Alternatively, they might have been placed on processional barques, bases, or emblems, as temple relief depictions suggest. Although in such cases, we would expect the use of metal or wooden statuettes, which are lighter and easier to affix to a monument intended to be carried and transported on the shoulders of priests.

Ramesside reliefs, such as those in the various chapels of the temple of Sethy I in Abydos, show numerous small royal statues accompanying the king in his acts of offering. It is possible that these statues did not have fixed locations and were displayed on specific occasions in the temple chambers where rituals or ceremonies occurred. This would particularly apply to statues portraying the king in the act of presenting an offering.



FIG. 12. Rear part of a small sphinx with the cartouches of Ramesses VII [U7951-3].

[...] (*Wsr-mꜣ'.t-R'-stp.n-R'-mry-'Imn*) sꜣ *R' nb h'.w (R'-ms-s it-'Imn-nꜥr-[hꜣꜣ-'Iwnw)* ...]

[...] Usermaatrat-setepenra-meryamun, the son of Ra, the lord of apparitions Ramesses-Itamun-  
[Heqa-Iunu...]

inv. 1972.125, and a Late Period ruler, inv. 1990.25, see: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544498> and <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544914>, accessed on 7th March, 2023).

The second piece of sculpture found in the destruction layer of this sector of Area 214 is the bust of a quartzite statue of Ramesses II, which probably once showed the king kneeling and holding an altar or an offering table in front of him (U7935-6, Figs. 13-14).<sup>17</sup> The statue was found face down on the surface of this layer of limestone chips, which can be dated to the Late Roman Period based on the pottery material found in it. Another large quartzite fragment was found beside it, possibly originating from the interior of the same statue (although it lacks any preserved original surface). It is likely that this torso was discarded as unsuitable for reuse, while the lower part (especially if it was a kneeling statue) may have been repurposed into a masonry block.

*ḥr k3-nḥ.t-mry-M3'.t n(i)-sw.t bity ([Wsr-M3'.t]-R' [...])*



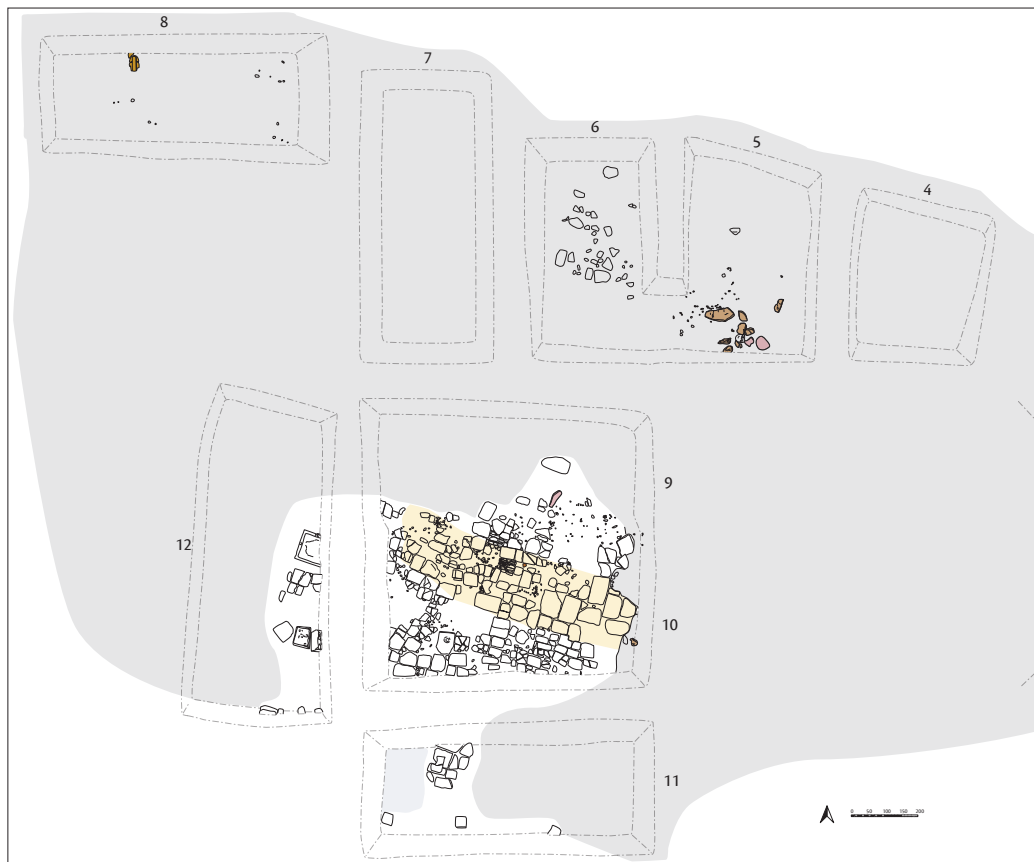
FIGS. 13-14. Torso of a statue of Ramesses II [U7938-6], *in situ* in Trench 8 and after cleaning.

## 6. REVEALING A NEW KINGDOM PAVED FORECOURT

A small portion of the area escaped the systematic dismantling of the site in Late Roman times and excavations of the early 20th century. Trenches 9 to 12, located to the south-west of the area investigated, revealed the preserved parts of a limestone pavement covering a surface area of approximately 15 × 15 m. In these three trenches, the stratigraphy was also remarkably intact, allowing for the reconstruction of the sequence of events that occurred. The pavement appeared heavily weathered, likely due to prolonged exposure and use. It was positioned above a thick layer of compact soil filled with ceramic sherds dating from the Old Kingdom and the 18th Dynasty. The limestone slabs themselves were covered by two successive layers of black soil containing late Hellenistic and early Roman pottery, suggesting a phase of abandonment or lack of maintenance around that period. This chronology corresponds to historical reconstructions obtained from other sources. Indeed, all the investigated areas in Matariya seem to reflect a

<sup>17</sup> Dimensions: H. 51.2; W. 26.7; D. 22.2 cm.

lack of monumental constructions and perhaps a beginning of neglect towards the end of the Hellenistic Period, a few centuries before the site became a large-scale quarry. This observation also corroborates Strabo's description of the site as a "deserted city" in the Augustan Period (17, 1, 27).<sup>18</sup> Based on the stratigraphy and the pottery material found beneath and above the pavement, it appears that the site was in use from the second half of the New Kingdom to the end of the 1st millennium BC. Above the layers of black soil containing Hellenistic and early Roman pottery, there was a layer of crushed limestone resembling that found in the surrounding excavated trenches, although much thinner since the pavement had not been removed or crushed into fragments.



**FIG. 15.** Map of the excavated trenches in Area 214. The grey shading represents the surface areas that were extensively disturbed in the Late Roman Period and later. The small white area indicates the only fully preserved stratigraphy. The yellow colour is the extension of the "cachette."

<sup>18</sup> See trad. H.C. HAMILTON AND W. FALCONER (The Perseus Digital Library, [www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/)). The pottery material found during the last campaigns of the Egyptian-German mission attests to human activity throughout the Ptolemaic period. However, Heliopolis appears to have experienced a rather severe economic decline following the reign of Nectanebo I. No monumental inscriptions, reliefs, or statues dating after this king were found. This decline likely resulted in the gradual transformation of the landscape over three hundred years, eventually leading to the desolate state described by Strabo. This situation remains intriguing, given that Heliopolis continued to be mentioned as a main reference point for Egyptian religion, both within and outside Egypt. The name of the ancient temple city may have become a *topos* rather than an active place of worship, with the main attention shifting from Heliopolis towards neighbouring "satellite" places of worship, such as the necropolis of the Mnevis bulls, and the sanctuaries of Kher-Aha and Per-Hapy. See discussion in YOYOTTE 1954, pp. 110–115; EL-BANNA 2014, pp. 14–23; RAUE 2020, p. 339.



The slabs of this pavement follow the same NW-SE orientation as the temple (50 m to the north-west) and the mudbrick walls of Area 212 (80 m to the north) mentioned above. In the centre of the preserved area, the remains of a deposit of statue fragments were discovered beneath the pavement (see below). It is noteworthy that only this deposit included Late Period ceramic sherds, while the entire surrounding area beneath the limestone slabs only contained ceramics from the Old Kingdom and the 18th Dynasty.

The trench excavated in the south-western corner of the investigated area revealed the preserved western extremity of the limestone pavement (Trench 12, see Fig. 15). The sections of the trench (Figs. 16–17) showed the extent of the pavement that was spared in Late Roman times. In areas where the limestone slabs were missing (i.e., the western and northern parts of the trench), the crushed limestone layer went deeper, filling the pits created by ancient digging activity. This trench also yielded a peculiar feature: a sort of rectangular basin carved from a monolithic limestone block. The basin was installed and partially buried at the level of the limestone pavement, with its top likely reaching, at least originally, the walking level of the pavement. Like the pavement, this basin aligns with the general orientation of the temple and all the structures discovered in the vicinity of the remaining obelisk of Senusret I (Areas 211, 212 and 214). The basin was filled with a dense quantity of pottery from the Old and New Kingdoms, and one sherd from the 25th Dynasty. It appears to have been in use until the installation of the nearby “cachette” (see below), but may have then been concealed beneath the pavement refurbishment during the 26th Dynasty (see section drawing, Fig. 17). Whether or not it was still visible, the upper part of this basin was broken during quarrying activities in the Late Roman Period, involving the removal of the limestone paving slabs and the digging of a deep pit, the slope of which is clearly visible in the section. To the north of the remaining pavement and basin, the layer of crushed limestone extends to a considerable depth (reaching just below an altitude of 10,75 m) and contains Roman pottery at the lowest level reached.



**FIG. 16.** SQ 693/427E [= Trench 12]. Eastern section, showing the basin and a few remaining limestone blocks of the pavement. It is most likely that the basin (on the left in the photo) is still in its original position. Over time, it may have been buried and sealed by the pavement during the Late Period, as suggested by the dating of the pottery found within it.

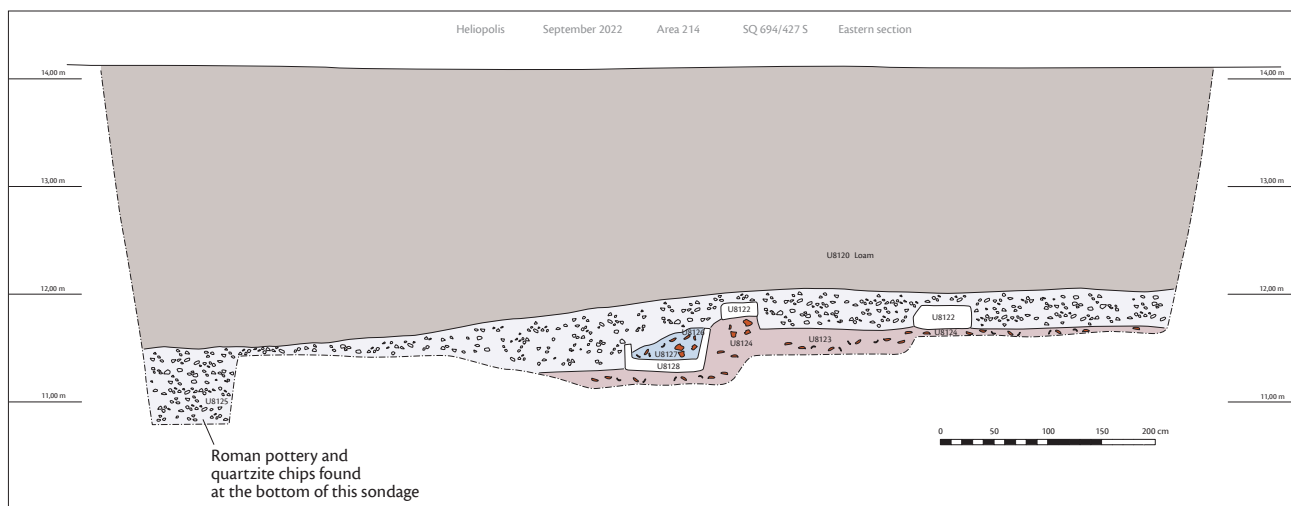


FIG. 17. SQ 693/427E [= Trench 12]. Eastern section. The basin was installed on a layer of soil containing Old Kingdom and 18th Dynasty pottery. Inside the basin, pottery from the same periods was discovered, along with one sherd from the 25th Dynasty. Only a few pavement slabs remained, suggesting that they may have once covered the basin. The entire area is covered by a layer of crushed limestone from the quarrying process, followed by two metres of loam.

## 7. A CACHE OF STATUE FRAGMENTS BENEATH THE PAVEMENT

As previously mentioned, a deposit, or “cachette”, was discovered beneath the preserved section of the pavement. This deposit comprised a 40-cm-deep trench running in an NW-SE direction (the same orientation as the temple and paving slabs). The trench measured two metres in width and at least eight metres in length (Figs. 18–24). The western extremity of the pit was reached, but it was cut to the east by a deep trench, possibly caused by agricultural activity or excavations in the early 20th century. As a result, the original length of this “cachette” remains unknown.

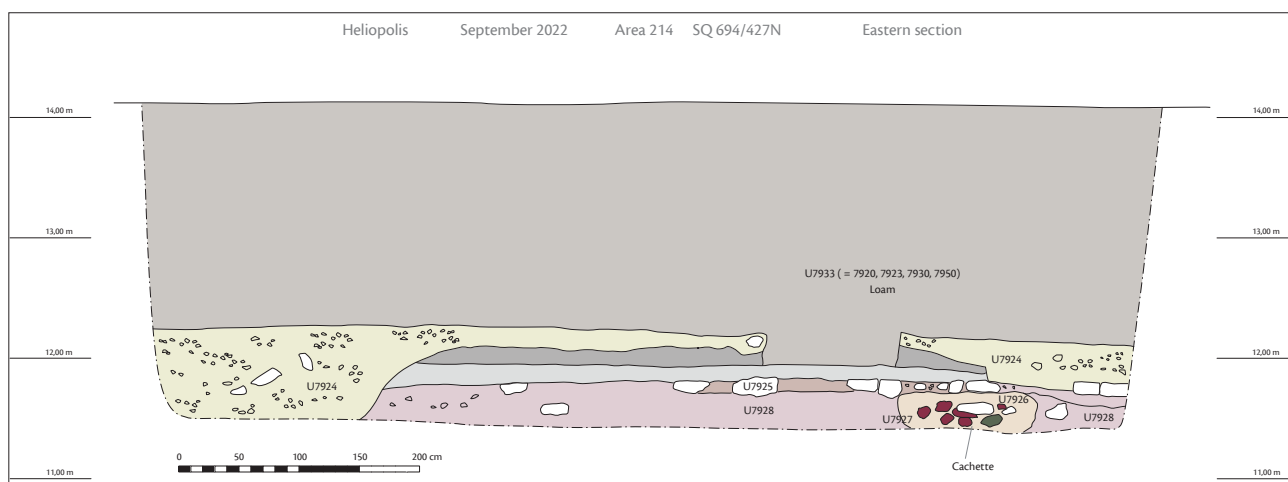
This elongated pit was filled with fragments of quartzite, greywacke, anorthositic gneiss, granodiorite, and limestone. All the fragments that could be dated are from the Middle and New Kingdoms, and most belong to statues. Ceramics found among them date to the Old Kingdom, the 18th Dynasty, and the Late Period. Only the pit’s infill contained pottery from the 1st millennium BC, whereas the surrounding layers of soil directly beneath the pavement, as well as the soil beneath the “cachette,” exclusively contained Old Kingdom and 18th Dynasty ceramic sherds. The complete absence of post-18th Dynasty pottery beneath the slabs, except within the pit’s infill, suggests that the paving was laid during or shortly after the 18th Dynasty. It is likely that some slabs were temporarily removed 300 to 400 years later to excavate a trench and bury these statue fragments before being put back in place.

859 ceramic sherds were found within the cachette. Among them, 772 sherds (89.9%) date to the Old Kingdom and 18th Dynasty, which is consistent with ceramics found elsewhere under the pavement. There were 55 heavily eroded sherds (6.4%) that could not be dated, and 19 sherds (2.2%) dating from the Ramesside to the early Third Intermediate Periods, as well as 13 sherds (1.5%) dating to the Late Period (from the 26th to the 30th Dynasty).

It may come as a surprise that the cache included so little pottery from the 1st millennium BC. In reality, it could result from a hasty act. The sequence of events can be reconstructed as follows:

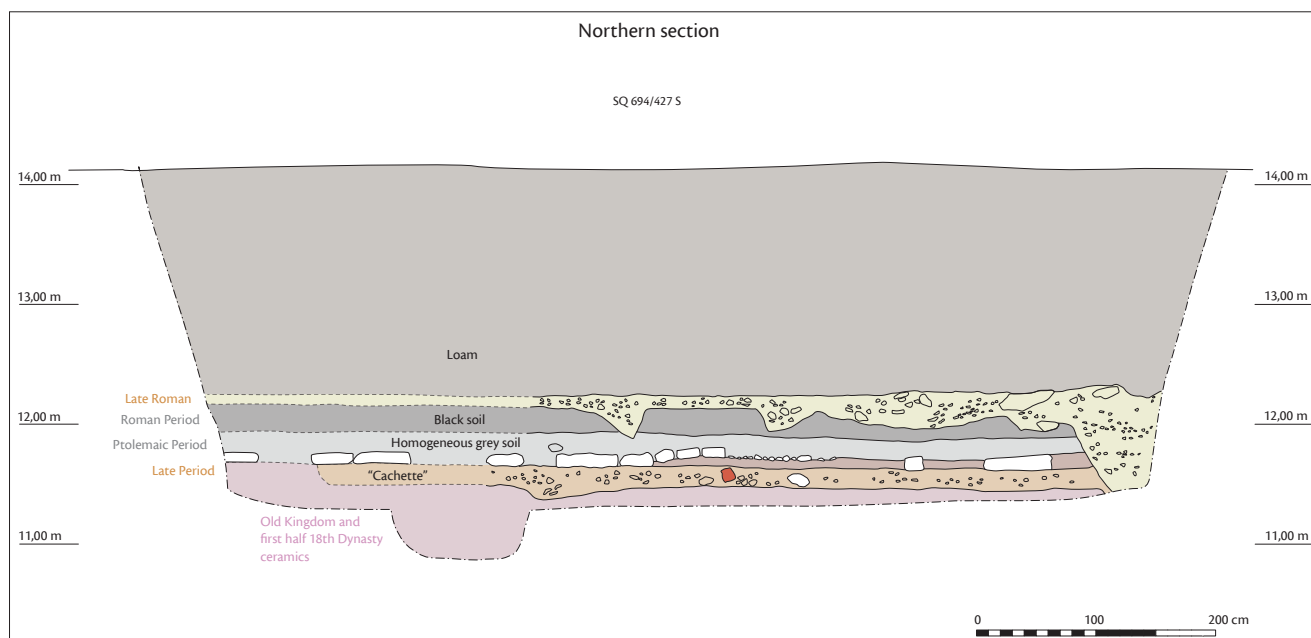
- to create the pit, a series of slabs were removed from the pavement;
- those responsible dug into soil rich in Old and New Kingdom ceramics, which were then piled in a *radim* near the pit;
- the stone fragments were then arranged in a dense layer at the bottom of the pit;
- before the pavement slabs were replaced, the pit was refilled with the same soil that had been removed, still loaded with ancient sherds.

There was likely little pottery present on the temple courtyard's pavement, and no cause for contemporary sherds to fall into the pit if the surface of the courtyard was clean. The 32 sherds from later periods than the 18th Dynasty were actually accidental, and we are fortunate to have them as they establish a *terminus post quem* for the burial of the stone fragments.



**FIG. 18.** Southern section of Trench 694/427N [= Trench 9]. The layer of dark brown compact soil containing Old and New Kingdom pottery is coloured pink. On top of this layer is the pavement, composed of limestone slabs indicated in white. The pavement is covered by a double layer of soil (light and darker grey in the drawing), containing ceramic sherds dating to the 1st century BC/CE. In turn, this layer is covered by a Late Roman Period destruction layer of crushed limestone. To the left of the drawing (i.e., to the east), the stratigraphical layers have been cut, probably due to the area's large-scale dismantling and quarrying. There, the limestone chips reach the sand layer beneath the archaeological ground. The western extremity of the "cachette" is shown in orange on the right.





**FIG. 19.** Northern section of Trench 694/427S [= Trench 10]. The layer of compact soil containing pottery from the Old and New Kingdoms is shown in pink. On top of this layer, the pavement is built of white limestone slabs. Above the pavement, there is a double layer of soil containing 1st century BC/CE pottery (light and darker grey in the drawing). The (Late Roman Period) destruction layer of crushed limestone is in light yellow, covered by two metres of loam from lake deposits. The preserved length of the "cachette" is visible in orange.



**FIG. 20.** Southern section of Trench 694/427N [= Trench 9] (detail) showing the "Cachette" densely filled with fragments of purple quartzite, greywacke, and limestone, as well as a handful of granodiorite and anorthositic gneiss.





**FIG. 21.** Northern section of Trench 694/427S [= Trench 10] displaying the limestone pavement that overlays a layer of brown soil packed with Old Kingdom and 18th Dynasty pottery, as well as the “cachette” unearthed within this soil. The section also shows the double layer of soil containing minimal material (1st century BC-CE pottery), which was covered by the Late Roman Period destruction layer.



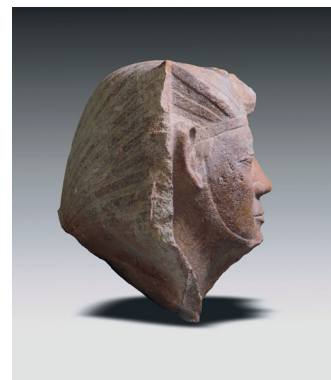
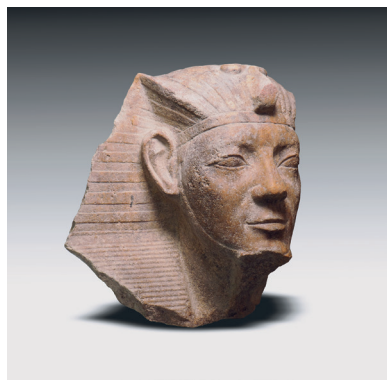
**FIG. 22.** Head of a sphinx from the early 13th Dynasty, found in the “cachette”, buried just under the limestone pavement.



**FIG. 23.** Trench 694/427S [= Trench 10]. Eastern extremity of the “cachette”. Several stone fragments exhibit traces of burning, particularly visible on the limestone chips, which have acquired a greyish colour.

## 8. FRAGMENTS OF MIDDLE AND NEW KINGDOMS STATUES BURIED BETWEEN THE 26TH AND THE 30TH DYNASTIES

Most of the statue fragments found in the deposit are head parts. Only one fragment is almost fully preserved, although the left wing of the *nemes*, the beard, and the head of the *uraeus* are missing (U8105-2,<sup>19</sup> Figs. 24–26). This fragment exhibits the stylistic facial features common to the early 13th Dynasty, characterised by a smile with uplifted corners of the mouth that contrast with the seemingly stern expression of the eyes. The eyelids are accentuated, and noticeable deep nasolabial furrows and a horizontal mark (top of the nose) between the eyebrows are observed. The ears are depicted in a large yet quite schematic manner. These facial features, together with the span of the *nemes*' wings and the S-shaped tail of the *uraeus* on top of the head, all point to early 13th Dynasty reigns.<sup>20</sup> Comparison with the portraits of Amenemhat-Sobekhotep Sekhemra-Khutawy (the dynasty's first king<sup>21</sup>) and Amenemhat V Sekhemkara, who is also attested by five other Heliopolitan sphinxes, including one made of quartzite, bolsters this identification.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the protruding angle formed by the remains of the back-plait of its *nemes* shows that the head found beneath the pavement belonged to a sphinx.



**FIGS. 24–26.** Early 13th Dynasty quartzite head of a sphinx [U8105-2] found buried upside down in the cachette, just beneath the limestone pavement (see Fig. 18). H. 32.7; W. 30.6; D. 25.8 cm.

<sup>19</sup> H. 32.7; W. 30.6; D. 25.8 cm. The dimensions do not precisely match those of the sphinx of Bab el-Nasr. Although these two statues might have belonged to the same series, they did not form a pair. The sphinx of Amenemhat V, found in Bab el-Nasr, originally measured approximately 90 × 50 × 180 cm, while the sphinx whose head was found beneath the pavement in Area 214 must have been smaller (ca. 70 × 40 × 145 cm).

<sup>20</sup> We cannot entirely rule out a possible portrait of Amenemhat IV, whose quartzite sphinxes are abundant in Heliopolis. The three wrinkles on top of the nose could also be consistent with his portrait. However, the “smile” appears to be a characteristic of the early 13th Dynasty. Concerning the stylistic criteria of royal statuary from Amenemhat IV to the early 13th Dynasty, see CONNOR 2020, pp. 44–51.

<sup>21</sup> SIESSE 2019, pp. 67–78.

<sup>22</sup> Four headless granodiorite sphinxes of Amenemhat V were found among the statue bodies (mostly sphinxes) buried in the Roman/Late Roman period south of the temple, 50 m west of the “cachette.” See ASHMAWY et al. 2023. The same king's quartzite sphinx was reused as the lintel of a postern in the Fatimid northern walls of Cairo, near Bab el-Nasr (EL-MEZAIN, KACEM 2019; CONNOR, ABOU AL-ELLA 2020).



Most of the fragments found in the deposit beneath the paving stones of Area 214 belonged to sphinxes. However, there was one purple quartzite fragment that depicted three toes of a human foot belonging to a relatively small kneeling statue (Figs. 27–29 and 59). The preserved fragmentary cartouche corresponds to Amenhotep III, and the type of collar (Fig. 59) and bracelet (Fig. 28) align with this dating. Another statuette, about 70 cm long and carved from anorthositic gneiss, bore the cartouche of Nefer-[ka]-ra-[setepenra] (Ramesses IX) and showed the king in a prostrate posture, holding an altar with a scarab in front of him (Figs. 30–33).



**FIGS. 27–29.** Fragments belonging to at least one statuette made of purple quartzite showing the king in the kneeling position. Base: U7926-78+U7943-3. H. 12; D. 7 cm. Arm: U7943-5. H. 5.4; W. 4.6, D. 15.1 cm. Toes: U7943-11. H. 3.4; W. 6.6; D. 6.65 cm.



30.



31.



32.



33.

**FIG. 30.** Fragment of a kneeling statue made of anorthositic gneiss. [U7926-3]. H. 14.4; W. 17.6; D. 22.9 cm.

**FIG. 31.** Right eye and forehead of a statue made of anorthositic gneiss. [U8105-3]. H. 9.1; W. 6.8; D. 6.3 cm.

**FIG. 32.** Fragment of a statue made of anorthositic gneiss (scarab on top of an altar?), probably part of the same statue as U7953-4, Fig. 33). [U7943-2]. H. 12.6; W. 14.5; D. 10.8 cm.

**FIG. 33.** Fragment of a statue made of anorthositic gneiss (probably showing an altar, with the cartouche of Ramesses IX). [U7953-4]. H. 12.8; W. 12.4; D. 11.8 cm.

402 stone fragments were found in the infill of the “cachette”. Among them, 173 fragments showed an original carved surface, while 229 fragments (i.e., 57% of the corpus) lacked any visible surface and were part of the interior of sculpted pieces. These identified fragments belonged to at least 13 royal statues. However, there was one exception—a non-statue piece that appeared to be a fragment of a temple model or offering table (U7926-8 + U7943-4 + U7941-4, see Figs. 55–56).

The majority of the fragments ranged in thickness from 5 to 20 cm. Only a small number of fragments were larger in size, with the two largest pieces being a granodiorite sphinx fragment (U8107-4, max. width 32.5 cm, see Fig. 53) and a fragment of the head of a 13th Dynasty king (U8105-2, max height 32.7 cm, see Figs. 24–26).

Most of the statue fragments are from sphinx heads or chests. Very few could be jointed. Therefore, it is evident that we are not dealing with the burial of a series of accidentally broken sculptures, but rather a selection of various statues whose bodies were not placed in the same deposit. Despite the scarcity of inscribed fragments, the following kings can be identified:<sup>23</sup>

- **Senusret III:** At least three slightly smaller than life-size heads wearing the nemes, made of purple quartzite (Figs. 34–38).
- **An early 13th Dynasty king:** The aforementioned slightly smaller than life-size sphinx head, made of orange quartzite (Figs. 24–26).
- **Amenemhat V (?)**: Fragment of a granodiorite sphinx (Fig. 53).
- **Thutmosis III:** A life-size head in red granite (Fig. 50).
- **Amenhotep III:** At least one kneeling statuette in purple quartzite (Figs. 27–29).
- **Ramesses II:** Numerous fragments from at least five quartzite sphinxes, primarily comprising faces and nemes, with a few shoulder and chest fragments. Two of these fragments bear the king’s cartouche. The heads of Ramesses II exhibit three distinct styles (as largely attested by his statuary repertoire): an “early” style with a juvenile physiognomy reminiscent of Sethy I’s style (Fig. 39); a well-defined style with almond-shaped eyes, heavy eyelids, and a smile indicated by deep grooves around the corners of the mouth (Figs. 40, 42); and a third style featuring subtly modelled eyes, creating a sort of “sfumato”<sup>24</sup> effect (Fig. 43). Despite variations in size and style, all these fragments appear to be from sphinxes wearing the nemes and made of a purple variety of quartzite. A fragment with an ear (Fig. 41) can also be dated to the reign of Ramesses II because of the pierced lobe and the shape of the ear itself, with the tragus forming a curve towards the tympanum. Other fragments of these sphinxes belong to shoulders and manes (Figs. 44–46) as well as to the nemes (Figs. 47–49).
- **Ramesses IX:** At least one kneeling statuette made of anorthositic gneiss, and possibly a second statue (Figs. 30–33).

<sup>23</sup> On stylistic grounds. Only one fragment displayed the name of Amenhotep III, while some others featured the cartouches of Ramesses II.

<sup>24</sup> We borrow this term from Italian art history to designate the attenuated modelling, the absence of precise contours, found at eye level on certain statues of Ramesses II—as well as sometimes on some late 18th Dynasty sculptures. The impression of incompleteness that results today was probably corrected by painting, which gave the statues a very different appearance and greater presential power.

The materials found within this deposit are as follows:

- **Quartzite:** 254 fragments (63.2%). Notably, the predominant use of purple quartzite stands out, which is uncommon in the statuary repertoire, except during the reigns of Amenhotep III and Akhenaten.<sup>25</sup> This particular choice of quartzite may be specific to the repertoire produced for Heliopolis.
- **Granodiorite:** 22 fragments (5.5%): 9 with a surface and 13 without. The identifiable parts belong to the nemes, with the largest fragment being a forehead (see Fig. 51).
- **Granite:** 9 fragments (2.2%): 6 chips without carved surfaces, and 3 fragments depicting heads wearing the nemes, including the lower part of head stylistically attributable to a Thutmosid king (see Fig. 50).
- **Anorthositic gneiss:** 7 fragments (1.75%) belonging to at least two relatively small statues, at least one of which depicts Ramesses IX in a prostrate position (see Figs. 30–33).
- **Greywacke:** 91 chips (22.6%) belonging to at least two monuments: a small sphinx (Fig. 52) and a Sethy I model or offering table (Figs. 54–56).
- **Alabaster:** 3 chips (0.75%) from objects whose original form could not be clearly identified, perhaps offering tables.
- **Limestone:** 16 large chips (4%), all clearly burnt (with a greyish-blackish colour covering their entire surface).



34.

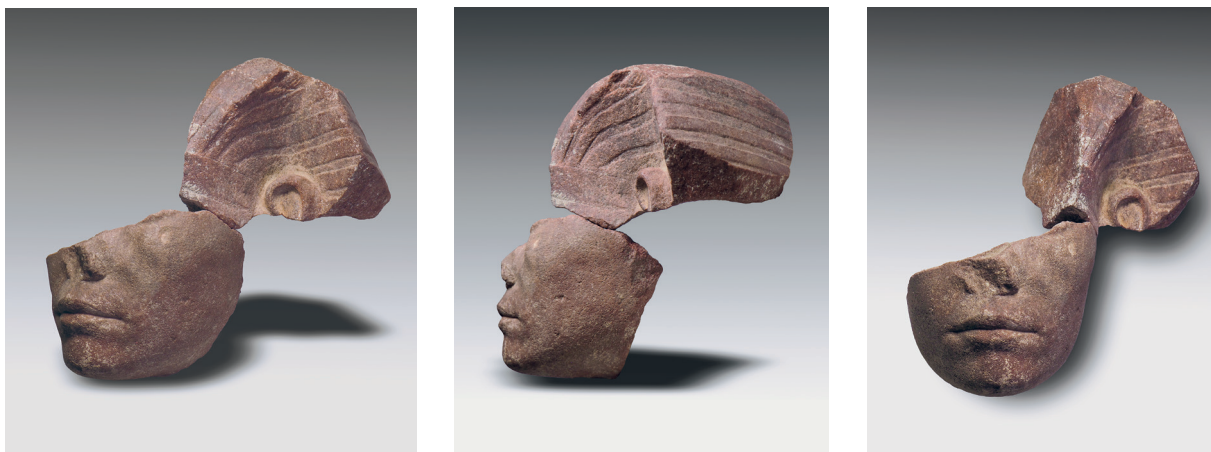


35.

**FIG. 34.** Fragment of a quartzite head displaying the features and stylistic treatment seen in Sensusret III's statuary. [U7943-9]. H. 9.7; W. 8.8; D. 4.4 cm.

**FIG. 35.** Fragment of a quartzite head, specifically the forehead. [U8105-13 + U8107-29]. The alternating pattern of one thick for every two thin lines on the nemes is specific to the 12th Dynasty. D. 19.5 cm.

<sup>25</sup> The small sphinx of Thutmosis III, discovered during Schiaparelli's excavations in Heliopolis (1903–1906) and now housed in Turin (inv. S. 2673), is worth mentioning as it shares the same variety of purple quartzite. This material, quarried nearby at Gebel el-Ahmar, appears to have been particularly favoured for producing statues destined for Heliopolis.



**FIGS. 36-38.** Two jointed fragments of a purple quartzite head showing the features of Senusret III. Upper fragment [U8107-3]: H. 11.9; W. 12.9; D. 16.3 cm. Lower fragment [U8105-2]: H. 10.8; W. 12; D. 11.2 cm.



39.



40.



41.

**FIG. 39.** Fragment of a quartzite statue showing the facial features of Ramesses II. [U7926-10]. H. 9.8; W. 9.8; D. 5.5 cm.

**FIG. 40.** Chin and mouth of a quartzite statue of Ramesses II. [U7931-7]. H. 8.3; W. 8.5; D. 4.4 cm.

**FIG. 41.** Right ear of a quartzite statue of Ramesses II, with pierced lobe. [U7926-16]. H. 8.4; W. 10.5; D. 9.8 cm.





42.



43.

FIG. 42. Head of a statue of Ramesses II. [U7926-33]. H. 18; 25.3; 23.3 cm.

FIG. 43. Head of a statue of Ramesses II, with “sfumato” eyes.<sup>26</sup> [U8107-11]. H. 18.5; W. 12.5; D. 21.5 cm.



44.



45.



46.

FIG. 44. Fragment of a quartzite sphinx shoulder, with nemes lappet (probably a statue of Ramesses II). [U8107-10]. H. 17.5; W. 13.5; D. 11 cm.

FIG. 45. Fragment of a quartzite sphinx shoulder featuring the cartouche of Ramesses II. [U7931-13]. H. 6.5; W. 7.5; D. 6.4 cm.

FIG. 46. Fragment of the mane of a quartzite sphinx. [U8107-15]. H. 6.5; W. 9.1; D. 5.6 cm.

<sup>26</sup> For comparison, see the head in Turin, inv. S. 2700, found in Heliopolis by E. Schiaparelli's team at the beginning of the 20th century. It is also composed of quartzite, has similar dimensions (25.5 × 11.5 × 24 cm), and shows the same “sfumato” treatment of the facial features. Several photos of this head are available on the museum website ([https://collezioni.museoegizio.it/en-GB/material/S\\_2700](https://collezioni.museoegizio.it/en-GB/material/S_2700), accessed on 28th March 2023). Regarding the style of Ramesses II's statuary, see SOUROUZIAN 2020, pp. 401–409 (particularly p. 405 concerning statues that, like in this case, appear to be unfinished and lacking the final polishing and tracing of details that may have been painted rather than sculpted).



47.



48.



49.

FIG. 47. Fragment of a quartzite statue (forehead with nemes). [U8107-17]. H. 9.8cm.

FIG. 48. Fragment of a quartzite statue (nemes lappet). [U8107-28]. H. 13.2; W. 8; D. 10.3cm.

FIG. 49. Fragment of a quartzite statue (nemes right wing and lappet). [U8107-24]. H. 13; W. 15; D. 10cm.



50.



51.



52.

FIG. 50. Granite head of Thutmosis III (?) [U8107-5]. H. 19; W. 19; D. 28 cm.

FIG. 51. Forehead of a granodiorite statue wearing a nemes [U7926-6]. H. 15.4; W. 10.1; D. 14.5 cm.

FIG. 52. One of the greywacke fragments from a small sphinx (tail and part of the leg) [U7926-9]. H. 8.9; W. 6.2; D. 13.4cm.

The collection of these head fragments in a single deposit is reminiscent of the discovery of headless sphinx bodies 6 months earlier in the spring 2022 season. These bodies were found in Area 2II, 50 meters west of the “cachette”, buried along the massive southern limestone wall of the Late Period temple (see above). Both cases involve sculptures depicting kings from the Middle and New Kingdoms, predominantly carved of quartzite, with some made of granodiorite and granite. An additional piece of evidence supports a possible correlation. Among the fragments unearthed in the pit, most represent parts of nemes and facial details. However, there is at least one large fragment that belongs to the body of a granodiorite sphinx (U8107-4, Fig. 53). This particular fragment is significant because its dimensions and style bear a striking resemblance to four Amenemhat V sphinxes, which, in the spring of 2022, were discovered 30 m to the west, within the Late Roman pit against the southern wall

of the temple.<sup>27</sup> The dimensions and stylistic features of the paw show a close resemblance, characterised by an angular treatment of the sculpture's modelling.

Although a direct connection between the head fragments from the “cachette” and the sphinx bodies discarded south of the temple has not yet been made, their shared characteristics in terms of size, material, and dating strongly suggest a relationship between these sculpture fragments.<sup>28</sup>



FIG. 53. Fragment showing the mid-body part and right rear paw of a granodiorite sphinx, probably of Amenemhat V [U8107-4]. H. 16; W. 32.5; D. 22 cm.

Although the majority of fragments found in the “cachette” belonged to statues, it is less clear whether the limestone chips (most of which are burnt) were parts of architectural elements. The three alabaster chips with smooth, flat surfaces could also have been components of offering tables or altars. Another object that has been identified comprises three jointed fragments of a greywacke monument bearing the cartouche of Sethy I (Figs. 54–56). The flat surfaces on the four adjacent sides (including the upper and lower surfaces) of the reconstructed fragment show that it is the corner of an object, possibly a temple model base, with its height preserved. The decorated section of the object appears to show the figure of Sethy I in a kneeling position, presenting an offering to a deity.

The dimensions and ornamentation of this object resemble a temple model base currently housed in the Brooklyn Museum (inv. 49.183, Fig. 57).<sup>29</sup> The Brooklyn model, which was discovered at Tell el-Yahudiya, a site with strong ties to ancient Heliopolis, depicts the king

<sup>27</sup> ASHMAWY et al. 2023. The four sphinxes of Amenemhat V are currently on display in Matariya's open-air museum.

<sup>28</sup> See further details in ASHMAWY et al. 2023. The context of the “cachette” suggests that the decapitation of statues took place during the Late Period, since the deposition of the head fragments can be dated to the time span between late 26th and 30th Dynasty, according to the associated ceramics and the dating of the archaeological layers above the pavement. The question of the reuse of sphinx bodies during this historical period and their subsequent fate until their abandonment south of the temple is currently under study by F. Langermann.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/3543> (with numerous photos showcasing all sides of the object). See BRAND 1998, pp. 143–145. The temple gateway model from Tell el-Yahudiya measures 24.1 × 111.8 × 86.4 cm. The total height includes the rear part of the model (see Fig. 56). The front part of the Brooklyn model, which corresponds to the forecourt of the gateway model, is approximately the same height as the fragment found in Matariya's Area 214 “cachette”.



prostrate presenting offerings towards the axis of the invisible deity on the main face of the temple model base. On the side faces, the figures of the king are oriented towards the back, symbolising the sanctuary. However, with the Matariya piece, it is highly probable that the king is kneeling instead of being prostrate. This assumption is based on the fact that the image is bounded by a vertical line just behind the figure of the king, which represents the inner corner of the object and forms a protruding angle. The figure of the king faces the outer corner of the object (with a very small part of the angle formed by the perpendicular face preserved). By comparing it with the Brooklyn model, it is reasonable to conclude that we are dealing with a lateral part of a base, and the figure of the king is oriented towards the focal point of the object on the missing perpendicular surface.



**FIG. 54.** Greywacke chips discovered in the “cachette”. Some clearly belong to a small sphinx (see Fig. 52), while at least three (which could be jointed) are part of the offering table/base (?) of Sethy I (Figs. 55–56). Most greywacke fragments lacked their original surface and hence could not be assigned to a specific monument.



**FIG. 55.** Sethy I greywacke offering table/base/podium (?). [U7926-8 + U7943-4 + U7941-4]. H. 19.2; W. 24.4; D. 19.7 cm.

FIG. 56. Sethy I offering table/base/podium (?). The upper, lower, and right perpendicular sides are partly preserved, along with a protruding element behind the figure of the king. The ornamentation and dimensions of the fragment suggest a possible comparison with the model base from Tell el-Yahudiya, currently housed in the Brooklyn Museum.



© Brooklyn Museum. Creative Commons



FIG. 57. Model base from Tell el-Yahudiya (side view). Brooklyn Museum, inv. 49.183.

## 9. SCULPTURE DEMISE: DISMANTLING, BURNING, AND BURIAL

Burying statues or fragments, as well as ritual objects, is a well-attested practise along the Nile Valley, although its *raison d'être* is difficult to decipher. These deposits are referred to by various names (such as favissa, cache, cachette, sacred deposit, etc.), with scholars sometimes offering different definitions.<sup>30</sup> The circumstances of the burial of these objects varies greatly, influenced by factors such as the time period, site, and the political and cultic contexts in which this practice occurred.

The dimensions of these deposits vary considerably, and the conditions in which the pieces were buried differ greatly from one case to another. The most famous and largest deposit ever found was the “Cachette” of Karnak, discovered in 1904 beneath the pavement of the courtyard of the 7th pylon of the Temple of Amun at Karnak. This pit contained several hundred stone statues of kings, private figures, and deities in various sizes, positions, and states of preservation, as well as thousands of bronzes and wooden objects that could not be preserved.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See the various contributions in VALBELLE, YOYOTTE (eds.) 2011, as well as in COULON (ed.) 2016.

<sup>31</sup> See the collective work edited by L. COULON (2016) for numerous studies on the material unearthed in this cachette, particularly the article by E. Jambon, who dates the cache to the end of the Ptolemaic period and provides interpretations for the mutilations inflicted on the buried statues.

A few kilometres away, another cachette or sacred deposit, probably dating from the Roman period, was discovered beneath the paving slabs of the solar courtyard of the Luxor Temple.<sup>32</sup> This deposit, although smaller than the Karnak Cachette, exhibits similar organisational features, with statues arranged in a way to prevent damage and protected by the base of an upturned statue (in the case of the Luxor Cachette, whereas the Karnak Cachette was covered by a large stele). The Luxor Cachette is characterised by the excellent condition of the statues buried there, all of which depict kings and gods. The noses, wrists, and ankles have not been intentionally damaged, unlike the mutilations typically observed in the statuary unearthed in the Karnak Cachette.

These two contexts differ considerably from that of Matariya. In all three cases, the sculptures are buried under the pavement of a temple courtyard. However, apart from the time difference between these cases (the Matariya deposit predates the Karnak and Luxor caches by 300 to 500 years), an important distinction is that the statues from the Luxor cache were buried complete, while those from Karnak were mostly complete, even if often buried in fragmented form and reconstructed in modern times for display. In contrast, the Matariya deposit primarily comprises samples, mostly heads, from statues whose bodies were buried or reused elsewhere.

Dating from the same period as the Karnak Cachette, towards the end of the Ptolemaic period, mention should be made of the “favissa” unearthed behind the temple of Ptah at Karnak, which was documented in detail in 2014. Objects made of various materials, including small Osirian bronzes, were discovered in this pit, accompanying the burial of a “decommissioned” statue of the god Ptah.<sup>33</sup> In this case, the entire assemblage seems to be organised around the statue of the god, buried like a human body. Another possible example of “statue graves” can be found in the caches of royal statues in Dokki Gel and Dangeil. In these two cases, statues of Kushite kings were broken into large fragments and carefully buried in the sacred soil of the temenos. As suggested by J. Anderson et al., these statue burials could reflect a remodelling of cultic activities in the Meroitic period.<sup>34</sup> However, these cases differ from Matariya in that the statues, despite being dismantled, were completely buried within the caches. It was not simply a matter of gathering samples from various statues, but a deliberate act of burying a complete set of statues that had been intentionally fragmented.

Perhaps more closely related to our case is a cache discovered in 1908 at Elephantine, at the foot of the foundations of the Temple of Satet. This cache comprised a mudbrick pit, probably dating from the Ptolemaic period, filled with various cultic objects, fragments of statues, and figurines depicting gods, private individuals, and animals. These objects were made from various materials and dated to different periods. Despite their poor state of preservation, it appears that the objects were intentionally placed in a fragmented state.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> EL-SAGHIR 1992.

<sup>33</sup> CHARLOUX, THIERS 2019. There may have been other cases where statues and/or sacred object were “decommissioned” and discarded. This could be the case, for example, of the many bronzes bearing the effigy of Osiris that were buried beneath the pavements of certain temples, such as the Serapeum at Saqqara or the temple of Medinet Habu. MARIETTE 1882, pp. 32, 36, 38, 77, 79; see numerous examples mentioned in DARESSY 1906, III-IV. Unfortunately, we lack documentation on these contexts to date and characterize these deposits, but the dating of the bronzes, which spans from the Third Intermediate Period to the Ptolemaic period, suggests that they also date from the end of the 1st millennium BC.

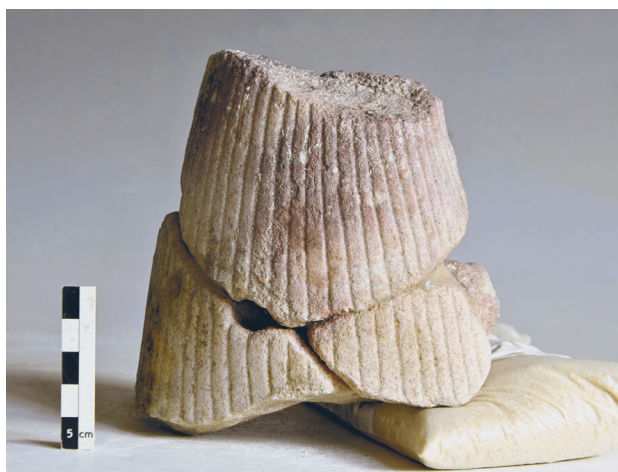
<sup>34</sup> ANDERSON et al. 2019, pp. 229–246. For an alternative interpretation and dating of the cachettes of Dokki Gel after the departure of Psamtik II’s troops around 591 BC, see VALBELLE, BONNET 2019, pp. 667–674 (with additional bibliography).

<sup>35</sup> DELANGE (ed.) 2012, pp. 289–340.



In the Matariya cache, no traces of wood were found, although this could be attributed to conservation conditions. The excavated contexts at Matariya are waterlogged (as mentioned above, the interior of the temenos was covered by a lake in medieval times until the 19th century). None of the recent trenches excavated at the site have yielded any traces of wood. Additionally, it is worth noting that the Matariya cache only included fragments of royal statues. This pattern is consistent with the material unearthed in the Heliopolis precinct, which has almost exclusively yielded royal and divine statues.<sup>36</sup>

As mentioned earlier, only a limited number of fragments from the Matariya deposit were capable of being jointed. A rare discovery sheds light on the deliberate nature of the damage inflicted on these statues, clearly indicating the use of tools. This evidence comes from three jointed fragments that once formed part of the mane of a quartzite sphinx, situated at shoulder level (Fig. 58). Upon reassembly, a hole becomes visible, marking the spot where a pointed tool was employed to dismantle (or, more precisely, decapitate) the statue. The deliberate nature of this breakage may be connected to a notable characteristic observed in the material found within the “cachette” of Area 214, namely the presence of distinct traces of burning on many stone fragments. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced on dark greyish chips of limestone, as well as on numerous fragments of quartzite, which exhibit a blackish and powdery appearance.



58.



59.

**FIG. 58.** Three joined fragments belonging to the mane of a sphinx in quartzite. [U7926-11 + U7926-12 + U7926-13]. U7926-11: H. 9.1; W. 9.5; D. 3.3 cm. U7926-12: H. 4.5; W. 5.8; W. 2.75 cm. U7926-13: H. 7.4; W. 10.2; D. 11.2 cm.

**FIG. 59.** Shoulder probably belonging to the kneeling statue of Amenhotep III (see Figs. 23–25). [U7931-6]. H. 6.3; W. 12.5; D. 12.2 cm. + [U7943-16]. H. 9.7; W. 7.5; D. 4.5 cm.

<sup>36</sup> See ASHMAWY, RAUE (eds.) 2023.



The act of burning statues must be addressed here because it has been observed elsewhere and warrants further exploration when analysing fragmentary statues currently housed in museums or storage facilities, detached from their original archaeological contexts.

On Sai Island, for example, a cache discovered in a modern graveyard yielded 400 small statue fragments, several of which bore traces of intentional breaks and burning. The British Museum-led project allowed for the reconstruction of at least 12 statues of varying size and position, made from different stones. In this case, all the statues belong to one individual, who may have been subjected to *damnatio memoriae* before the Amarna Period, as the name of the god Amun on these statues shows no sign of deliberate damage. Interestingly, Davies noted that many of these statues were not included in this cache, with only a selection being displayed.<sup>37</sup>

Another case involves the discovery of two standard-bearing statues of Amenhotep III in thousands of fragments at Karnak-North. These statues may represent one of the closest comparisons to our case. Despite being virtually complete, the statues were intentionally reduced to innumerable small fragments, which were then grouped together and carefully buried beneath the pavement at the entrance of the Temple of Montu. These fragments also showed signs of burning, leading to the interpretation that the two statues were affected by a fire.<sup>38</sup> However, an alternative reading could be that the burning of the two statues was intentional.

A question then arises: When traces of burning are found on the surface of damaged sculptures, was the fire intentionally set to dismantle the statue, or was it the result of some type of “execration rite”?

Investigating the first hypothesis, it is possible that, in some cases, fire was used to weaken the stone matrix, making it easier to cut the sculptures with tools.<sup>39</sup> This could have been the case for the two statues of Amenhotep III at Karnak-North, as well as for some of the statue heads found in Matariya’s Area 214 “cachette”. However, with Matariya, the burning was not systematic and only affected a selection of the fragments. In some instances, it is evident that the fire occurred *after* the dismantling and fragmentation of the statues. This is demonstrated by two fragments that could be jointed, one showing signs of burning and the other not: the shoulder and chest attributed to Amenhotep III (see Fig. 59). It is unlikely that the entire group of statues fell victim to a temple fire, as we would have expected more body parts in the pit, whereas they were the only exceptions.

If, however, we are dealing with an “execration rite,” we must avoid viewing it as a consequence of *damnatio memoriae*, as none of the identified kings were subject to proscription. The best attested king identified in the Matariya deposit, Ramesses II, was regarded as the model *par excellence* of rulers for centuries after his reign. There are no statues present of any Late Period rulers, such as Amasis, whose cartouches are sometimes erased.

<sup>37</sup> ARKELL 1939 and DAVIES 2017.

<sup>38</sup> BARGUET, LECLANT 1954, pp. 46–47, Figs. 78–79, pls. 56 and 58; VALBELLE 2016, pp. 21–23.

<sup>39</sup> This is perhaps the case of the colossal statue of Psametk I discovered in 2017 at Heliopolis, in the Suq el-Khamis sector (ASHMAWY, CONNOR, RAUE 2017, pp. 34–39; ASHMAWY, RAUE (eds.) 2023, pp. 160–182). The colossus was found buried in numerous fragments in a pit dated to the Roman period thanks to associated ceramic materials. The fragments from the kilt to the top of the crown were large, and the breaks were clean and sharp (apparently due to the statue’s fall rather than deliberate blows). In contrast, the legs and base were fragmented into thousands of small pieces, many of which were blackened and powdery. This suggests the possibility that fire was intentionally set at the base and feet of the statue, facilitating its dismantling with minimal effort.

The main difference between the case of Karnak-North and that of Matariya is that the latter deposit only contains a selection of statue parts, not complete sculptures. However, this may be precisely because the bodies were repurposed, while only the heads needed to be rendered inactive before burial. The key may lie in the link with the sphinx bodies discovered south of the temple. Future studies may identify connections between these statues and the fragments found in the cache.

The dating of the cache, between the 26th to the 30th Dynasties, along with the various stratigraphic layers covering the pavement (indicating the area's abandonment at the end of the Hellenistic period or the beginning of the Roman period), allow us to rule out damage to the heads caused by the site's Late Roman period dismantling. The decapitation of these statues and the burial of head fragments in a pit beneath the pavement dates from the 7th to 4th centuries BC. This act may have been related to the reuse of the bodies for reasons that have yet to be unravelled. The decapitation might have involved a form of ritual deactivation, neutralising the powerful images represented by the statues. Fire could have played a role in such a performance. The target was not the kings represented, but the statues themselves, which needed to be transformed from body-receptacles back into inert stone blocks. Although stripped of their power, they were still considered sacred and thus buried within the sacred precinct.

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