

| Research, Development and Management of Heritage on the Left Bank of the Nile: Ramesseum and its environs

by Christian Leblanc

As director of research at the CNRS, Christian Leblanc directs the French Archaeological Mission of Western Thebes. He is president of the Trust for the Safeguard of Ramesseum and a member of ICOMOS as well as a member of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities committee to safeguard the Valley of the Kings. After many years dedicated to the exploration and development of the Valley of the Queens, since 1991, his work and that of his team has focused on Ramesseum and the tomb of Ramses II.

The ruins of Ramesseum, a temple built during the reign of Ramses II, 1,800 B.C., extend over some ten hectares on the western bank of Luxor, bordering on cultivated land and the piedmont of the Libyan chain. Jean-François Champollion, who visited Ramesseum on 18 June 1829, considered it 'the loftiest and purest of the great monuments at Thebes'.¹ Since 1991, a Franco-Egyptian team has undertaken systematic exploration of Ramesseum based on three major research objectives: first, to define more precisely the liturgical function of this large structure that belongs to the category of temples said to be 'funerary', then attempt to understand its real vocation on a regional scale by studying the group of economic and administrative areas that surround it on three sides, and finally attempt to determine the religious and political reasons that explain why the buildings of these major royal institutions were abandoned at the end of the New Kingdom, and often recovered for other purposes. In addition to this essentially

RESEARCH AND CULTURAL POLICIES

scientific programme, other complementary projects have been implemented for the development of this exceptional site.

The contribution of recent archaeological research

Preserving the memory of the reign of its illustrious founder, who presided over the destiny of Egypt for nearly 67 years (1279–1212 B.C.),

In these outbuildings, built of mud bricks, more than thirty rooms equipped with ovens still concealed pottery dishes and many other vestiges that confirm the function of the rooms. The large scale of the area, which includes four semi-detached architectural units extending over nearly 3,000m², as well as the duration of its activity, show that these premises not only provided for divine and royal worship, but also catered for needs which went



© Guillaume Bouvier

24

24. Traditional architecture in Upper Egypt: Gurna housing is an integral part of the history of western Thebes.



© Guillaume Bouvier

25

25. Unauthorized concrete constructions in the vicinity of Ramesseum.

Ramesseum was also an administrative and economic centre of great importance, as revealed by numerous documentary sources, found notably in the tombs of government workers or the archives of the necropolis.² Current excavations in the field have enriched this data, allowing not only the identification of the various elements of this vast complex, but also revealing something of its organization and management.

In recent years, in the southern part, kitchens, bakeries and supply rooms of the temple were discovered, with numerous remaining fittings.

beyond the confines of Ramesseum. In this respect, we know that towards the end of the reign of Ramses III, and perhaps even later, these kitchens and bakeries provided part of the food rations distributed as a form of payment to the craftspeople of Deir el-Medineh, who were employed on the major sites of the western bank, such as the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens.

More recently, excavations conducted in the south-eastern part of the complex, between the kitchens and the royal palace, helped to establish the site of the Ramesseum school, an institution

where young boys were trained for the profession of scribe. More than 130 inscribed and figurative ostraca that have been discovered until now within a context of mud brick architectural structures, are at the origin of this identification, which is even more important because it is the first time that an

written in hieratic, within one of the groups of buildings which served as a repository for olive oil.⁴

A wide processional alley, lined with sphinxes and used for special rites surrounded the



© CNRS/Yann Rantie

26

26. Portico with Osirian pillars north-west of Ramesseum's second court before (left) and after (right) its restoration.

establishment of this kind has been physically located within a Pharaonic temple.³

To the north-west of the temple proper, the 'Treasury' was located, for which several attendants are known, including Tia, the brother-in-law of Ramses II who exercised this function during his reign. This building consists of a long room full of columns still flanked by large, vaulted store rooms where various foodstuffs from the royal domains were stocked. In this area, research undertaken today seeks to reveal the contents of each of these store rooms where luxury products were found, such as wine, oil, fats, and honey, as well as grain which was essential for making bread. Cleaning some of the floors has already revealed 'labels'

sacred space (*temenos*), between the two enclosure walls that had formerly determined its boundaries. This majestic avenue is currently being excavated. This work has revealed, on the northern side, the existence of rectangular limestone foundations as well as the presence of many fragments of clay chacal-sphinx figures, including a magnificent head of Anubis. These unearthed relics shed new light on the peripheral buildings of Ramesseum which had remained little known until now.⁵

Research development and the preservation of a prestigious site

In order to highlight the results of this research, which had been conducted over the years, and at

RESEARCH AND CULTURAL POLICIES

the same time preserve this important site of Egyptian cultural heritage, other actions were implemented from 1991 onwards, thanks to financial support from the Trust for the Safeguard of Ramesseum.⁶ In parallel to the excavations, studies and surveys, an ambitious programme for

excavated areas of its economic and administrative complex.

In the second courtyard, work has primarily focused on the restoration of walls and porticos which are ornamented with imposing



27. Ramesseum's kitchens and bakeries in 2002 after restoration.



28. Restitution of the bases of Ramesseum's columns, an example of reversibility in restoration, facilitating a better legibility of the ancient temple's architecture.

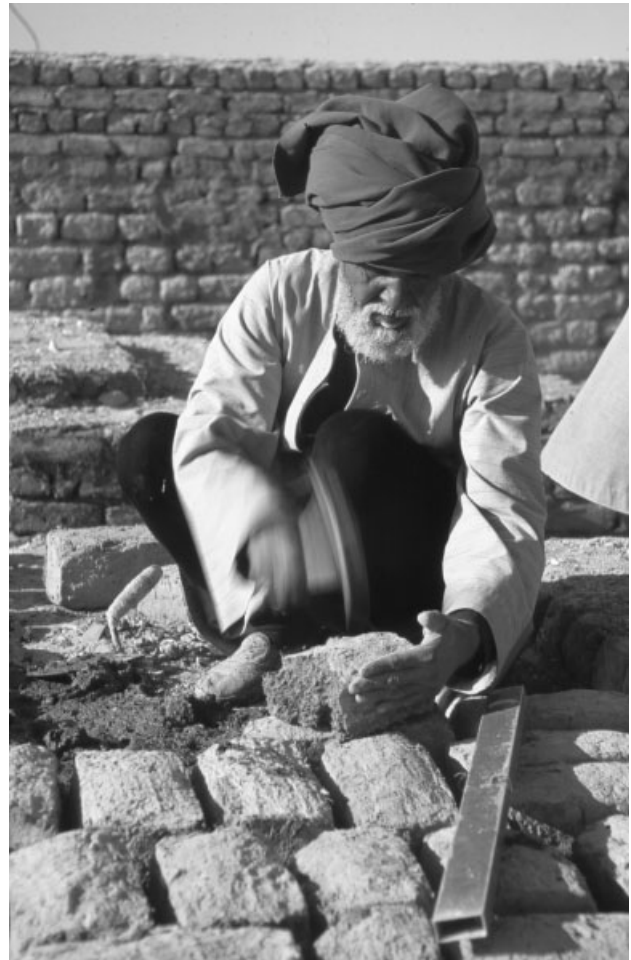
the conservation and restoration of the edifice and its outbuildings was set up, with the assistance of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities. The restoration of the first pylon, which had partially collapsed in ancient times, and the general or more global renovation of Ramesseum, whose romantic charm has not failed to please its illustrious visitors, have been included in ongoing and future operations.⁷ Based on the recommendations of the Venice Charter, the options chosen are intended to be as respectful as possible of the monument, while providing an educational presentation of the site and its components.⁸ Minimum intervention and reversibility have therefore guided operations which have been undertaken so far, within the accessible areas of the temple or in the

Osiriac colossi of the king, as well as on the restoration of the ancient pavement which had been largely pulled up. Two of the staircases providing access to the large hypostyle hall were also rebuilt, and in order to ensure that visitors have a better understanding of the former space as it was constructed, walls, columns and pillars which had disappeared on the surface, were raised on several foundations. Other actions were aimed at protecting and highlighting monumental statuary: in 1997, the 'Young Memnon' was placed on a new base, whose height corresponds to the supposed level of the original pedestal⁹ and, more recently, a magnificent head of Ramses II that had lain on the floor of the second courtyard, was installed on a plinth and braced.

A long and exacting operation was undertaken from 1992 in the large hypostyle room, concerning the sealing of joints, restoration of wall surfaces, as well as the cleansing, through a micro-abrasion process, of the columns and reliefs whose colours were hidden by centuries of dust.¹⁰ Painted surfaces that had already been treated were fixed with the help of an acrylic-type resin,¹¹ which had been used previously to save the mural paintings of Nefertari's famous tomb, and is recognized today for offering the best guarantees for withstanding light and for reversibility.

The restoration of the sanctuary, whose vestiges were excavated between 1997 and 2002,¹² was begun this year and should lead to the emergence of its architectural layout which has disappeared on the surface. It was decided to re-create the walls on a slight elevation, which would allow connecting this area with the rest of the temple, and additionally, facilitate comprehension of the entire layout.

In areas constructed out of mud bricks, it was also necessary to intervene in order to protect these fragile structures, which are often very damaged and occasionally subject to torrential rain.¹³ Under the circumstances, the most suitable solution was to cover the ancient walls with several layers of modern bricks, made out of the same material, indicating this additional elevation with a slight protrusion. In order to ensure the aesthetics of this protection, it seemed preferable to follow the shape of the structure of the ruins rather than make the restoration too rigid by imposing a uniform elevation to the entire structure. The work that has been carried out in the kitchen and



© CNRS/Yann Rantier

29

29. Craftsman working to safeguard the raw brick structures of Ramesseum's kitchens and bakeries.

bakery areas of the temple shows that satisfactory results can be achieved, with the additional advantage of being a reversible process. Less evident, however, are solutions for protecting the ancient vaulted ceilings which were also built out of this perishable material. At the beginning of the twentieth century, E. Baraize had partially resolved the problem in Ramesseum's warehouses by reinforcing the vaults with metal or mud-brick supports. This remains an efficient system



© CNRS/Yann Rautier

30

30. The second court of Ramesseum after restoration.

without detracting from the aesthetics of the architecture, but should be extended to eight other warehouses in the temple. We are perfectly aware of this priority which is on the agenda for our forthcoming missions.

Ramesseum and the protection of its environment

Agricultural expansion and urbanization, which are still too often unsupervised in Egypt, are sectors which harm the environment of archaeological sites and the efforts which have been deployed for their preservation and development. Ramesseum, like the majority of other monuments in western Thebes, is not immune to these threats. While an extension of cultivated land is already visible in front of the first pylon, there is also the chaotic construction

of modern dwellings, several of which were built out of cement, which increasingly surround the temple, to the south as well as the north, and are detrimental to future development of the project. This is why, in close collaboration with the Department of EAIS of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities,¹⁴ an analysis of the risks was studied on the scale of this area, with a view to proposing more balanced solutions.

This pilot action, based on the principles of heritage protection, concerns first of all the temple, strictly speaking, and its immediate periphery. The enormous earthwork which has surrounded it on three sides since 1906,¹⁵ is gradually disappearing, leaving the original walls which, after restoration, will definitively protect the internal structures of the edifice. However, to achieve this, the asphalt

road built behind the temple constitutes an obstacle which must be overcome, either by modifying its itinerary or by eliminating, an entire branch of this modern road which not only encroaches upon the remains of Ramesseum, but also crosses, a little further to the south, the first courtyard of the palace of Thutmosis III which is thousands of years old. This road that was originally drawn without taking into account the archaeological spaces that it severs or disfigures, also alters the exceptional panorama of a cultural landscape – that of the Theban mountain, its necropolises and traditional dwellings – which are considered to be among the finest in the world.

On all sides of Ramesseum, aside from prohibiting any new building, the ruins of other temples from the New Kingdom should also be preserved: that of Amenhotep II, to the north, which an Italian archaeological mission has fortunately been in the process of conscientiously excavating for the past several years,¹⁶ and that of Thutmosis IV, just to the south, which, on the other hand, was left to decay for decades and is condemned to disappear sooner or later, if no action for safeguarding is implemented. Serving as a thoroughfare for vehicles and transformed into a dump by the inhabitants whose houses are near the remains of the pylon, this temple, like the ancient palatial residence of Amenhotep III at Malqatta, is one of the most endangered sites of western Thebes and urgent intervention is recommended.¹⁷

Lastly, the extension of cultivated land and its continual irrigation presents, notably on the outskirts of these temples, an additional risk for their preservation. Rising groundwater through

capillarity dangerously affects the sandstone and mud bricks, and has already severely damaged the survival of these several-times-over millenary edifices. The case of the first pylon of Ramesseum constitutes an eloquent example, which can however be mitigated by initially installing a safety perimeter corresponding to the assumed surface area of its ancient parvis, fully hidden today by the agricultural zone.

In the face of these problems which are difficult to resolve because of a secular but unavoidable coexistence between the past and the present, the authorities of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities, fully aware of and even preoccupied by the problem, have already taken several measures. However, the cultural wealth of western Thebes is so vast and diverse that only an exhaustive and more global appraisal, embracing cultural as well as socio-economic aspects, will ensure that realistic serious planning for the protection, development and management of this prestigious heritage can be achieved.

| NOTES

1. J.-F. Champollion, *Lettres écrites d'Égypte et de Nubie entre 1828 et 1829* [Letters Written from Egypt and Nubia between 1828 and 1829], Paris, Firmin Didot Frères, 1833 (14th letter, sent from Thebes).

2. C. Leblanc, C. Barbotin, M. Nelson and G. Lecuyot, *Les monuments d'éternité de Ramsès II. Nouvelles fouilles thébaines. Les Dossiers du Louvre*, Paris, RMN, 1999.

3. C. Leblanc, 'L'école des scribes de Ramsès II', in *La recherche. L'actualité des sciences*, No. 379, Paris (October), 2004, pp. 70–4.

4. G. Bouvier, 'Le contenu du magasin H 34 du Ramesseum', *Memnonia*, Vol. XIV, (Cairo), 2003, pp. 59–80 and fig. VII.

RESEARCH AND CULTURAL POLICIES

5. M. Nelson, 'La voie processionnelle nord du Ramesseum', *Memnonia*, Vol. XV (Cairo) (forthcoming).
6. The Trust for the Safeguard of Ramesseum, sponsored by leading figures in the cultural and scientific world, was created in 1989 in order to participate in the restoration and development of the temple and tomb of Ramses II. It currently has some 800 international members. Headquarters: 173 rue de Charenton, 75012 Paris. Each year it edits a journal of regional history and archaeology (*Memnonia*) devoted to research and work carried out on the sites of western Thebes.
7. Hecatee d'Abdère and Diodore de Sicile described it as the 'Tomb of Ozymandias', while the geographer Strabon described it as 'Memnon's Palace'. Bonaparte's scholars carried out the first scientific surveys for the *Description of Egypt* when they examined the ruins in 1799. Champollion, Nestor L'Hôte, Rosellini, Belzoni, Salt, Ampère, Flaubert and Maxime du Camp are part of a long list of admirers who praised its magnificence, which is celebrated in Shelley's famous poem about its broken colossus ('Ozymandias').
8. C. Leblanc, J.-C. Golvin, A.-A. Sadek et al., 'Le projet de sauvegarde du temple de millions d'années de Ramsés II – Interventions d'urgence, exploration et mise en valeur du site', *Memnonia*, Vol. II, (Cairo), 1991, pp. 27–64 and figs. I–XI; C. Leblanc, J.-C. Golvin and A.-A. Sadek, 'La sauvegarde du Ramesseum', *Atti del Sesto Congresso Internazionale di Egittologia*, Vol. II, Turin, 1993, pp. 133–143 and figs. 1–4.
9. C. Leblanc and D. Esмоingt, 'Le 'Jeune Memnon': un colosse de Ramsès II nommé Ousermaâtrê-Setepenrê-aimé-d'Amon-Rê', in *Memnonia*, Vol. X (Cairo), 1999, pp. 79–100 and figs. XII–XXVII.
10. R. Bougrain-Dubourg, 'Le traitement des peintures murales dans la grande salle hypostyle du Ramesseum', in *Memnonia*, Vol. VII (Cairo), 1996, pp. 43–48 and figs. V–VII.
11. A paraloid B.72, diluted in an aromatic solvent; see R. Bougrain-Dubourg, op. cit., p. 47.
12. G. Lecuyot, 'Le sanctuaire du Ramesseum. Campagnes de fouilles 1997–1999' in *Memnonia* XI (Cairo), 2000, pp. 117–30 and figs. XVIII–XXV; by the same author: 'Le sanctuaire du Ramesseum. Campagnes de fouilles 2000–2002', in *Memnonia* XIV (Cairo), 2003, pp. 93–115 and figs. XI–XX.
13. The most recent, which struck the Theban region (on 2 November 1994), caused significant damage to heritage. See C. Leblanc, 'Thèbes et les pluies torrentielles. À propos de *mw n pt*', in *Memnonia* VI (Cairo), 1995, pp. 197–214 and figs. XXXVII–XXXIX.
14. EAIS (Egyptian Antiquities Information System). The SCA's Department of Archaeological Cartography.
15. After excavations began in 1903 by E. Baraize, the architect working for the Egyptian Service of Antiquities, the construction of this earthwork was completed in 1906. Baraize's aim was to excavate the temple and also provide a panoramic view of the ruins to tourists of the era: see E. Baraize, 'Déblaiement du Ramesseum', in *ASAE* 8 (Cairo), 1907, pp. 193–200.
16. A. Sesana, 'Preliminary Report of the Third Archaeological Expedition on the Area of the Temple of Amenophis II at Western Thebes', in *Memnonia* XII/XIII (Cairo), 2002, pp. 227–43 and figs. XIX–XXI; by the same author: *Temple of Amenophis II. 5th Archaeological Expedition. Preliminary Report*. (Como), 2003; *Temple of Amenhotep II. 6th Archaeological Expedition (2003–2004). Preliminary Report*. (Como), 2004.
17. C. Leblanc, 'Quelques suggestions pour la protection et la conservation du patrimoine pharaonique, à Thèbes-Ouest', *Memnonia*, Vol. XI (Cairo), 2000, pp. 191–9 and figs. XLII–XLVII; C. Leblanc, 'Response to Z. Hawass: Suggestions for the Protection and Conservation of the Pharaonic Heritage in Western Thebes', *Egyptology at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century. Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Egyptologists* (Cairo) 2000, Vol. 3, (Cairo) 2003, pp. 62–8.

Copyright of Museum International is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.