

# THE 'AIN BIRBIYEH TEMPLE PROJECT

## 2008 REPORT

The 'Ain Birbiyeh Temple Project was begun after 1982, when the site was first investigated by the Dakhleh Oasis Project. The site had been known to Egyptology since early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but had been dismissed as “the ruins of a fortress” or the “foundations of a temple”. When the Dakhleh Oasis Project initially encountered the site, a small test excavation was made, just to see if there was any monument remaining. It turned out, from the testing, that the stones seen on the surface of the site were in fact the ceiling and roofing blocks of a building. It appeared that in fact here was complete temple, buried to the roof in a mixture of heavy clay and sand, with the clay being major component of the mix.

Subsequently, further testing by A. Zielinski revealed that the stone of the temple was in rather poor condition and that a conservator would have to be present throughout the excavation process. We began to work in 1984 and were somewhat intermittent in our efforts, due largely to difficulties in attracting sufficient funding until the Netherlands Embassy in Cairo became interested in the project in the early part of this century. Finally, a four-year contract was issued to the Dakhleh Oasis Project to complete the work at the temple.

The staff members of the Temple Project have been Adam Zielinski, conservator; Olaf Kaper, epigrapher, who has brought with him a number of students, each learning epigraphic techniques “on the job”; Senad Safina, a conservator assigned to the Temple Project by the local antiquities inspectorate, who has been most valuable in the work; a variety of Inspectors, both local and from a distance; and Anthony Mills, director of the project. There have also been several occasional colleagues. Dr. Tomasz Herbich, a geophysicist who came in 2003 to assess an area east of the temple gateway, during which he discovered the main temple gateway, a structure of much greater dimensions, and who returned in 2008 and whose results suggest underground structures (as yet

unexcavated) adjacent to the south and east sides of the temple. There is also Dr. Krys Pluskota, who is a specialist in Græco-Roman ceramic traditions and who must return once again to complete his analysis of the pottery finds from the temple. Dr. Colin Hope, who is in overall charge of our ceramics analysis, will ultimately supervise this aspect of our recording.

This report concerns the work of the Ain Birbiyeh Temple Project through the years 2005-2006-2007 and 2008. These are years when the Project had been supported by the Kingdom of the Netherlands embassy in Cairo through the Contributions Contract number LCF 02/2005, "Excavation, Conservation and Completion of the Ain Birbiyeh Temple Project, Dakhleh Oasis." At the end of each season's work, a narrative and a financial report was submitted to the embassy. We are extremely grateful for the support which we have received from the Netherlands and hope to repay this by a successful conclusion of the project.

As a conservation technique, the SCA (then EAO) had decided that the entire structure was to be completely refilled with clean sand at the conclusion of the study. In fact, as we proceed to complete the recording of a room, it is then reburied and we move on to the next place of interest. This may seem a rather piecemeal way of getting to see the temple, but it does mean that all spaces would be seen for recording, without endangering the entire structure.

### ***Epigraphy***

To date, these past four seasons have seen the completion of the copying of the relief decoration on all of the internal walls of the temple. Unfortunately, Professor Kaper was obliged to return to the Netherlands before the end of the season and could not complete the examination of those fragments of relief that had become detached from the walls. It is only these few fragments which are preventing the conclusion of the epigraphic recording of the explored parts of the temple. Currently, these fragments are being kept in storage pending his return next season. All the fragments of decoration and of

architectural interest will eventually be returned to the area of the temple where they originated. This is to allow future students of the temple to more easily place them within the structure.

### ***Condition***

The condition of the structure of the temple deserves special attention, for this work and any undertaken by future excavators. The stone is sandstone, obtained from local quarrying. It is not of a very hard or strong nature, and is rather friable. The condition of the stone has been exacerbated by the fact that farming with its irrigation techniques on the top of the temple building (together with adjacent lands), has allowed water to penetrate the structure and thereby weakened the stone itself. There has been a second factor affecting the stability of the temple, which takes place while the structure lies buried. The underlying soil here is a clay which reacts to the presence of water by expanding, and conversely, to the withdrawal of water by shrinking. These movements in the soil under the foundations of the temple and in the soil fill within the temple complex have created stresses far greater than the building could withstand and the resulting dislocation of blocks and entire parts of the structure has created a temple where the walls/most of its components are unstable/in distress. The fact that the temple building has been completely buried in sand and clay has meant that it remains standing to its maximum height while the fabric has lost much of its integrity. It is this present condition which has required the conservation team to be constantly on site and ready to repair everywhere as it is revealed. It is this constant attention that has permitted the Project to continue to be able to see and to assess each aspect of the temple. It has also permitted the recording of about 90% of what would otherwise have been lost.

This temple is an unusual site. It is the first temple in Egypt to be excavated from the roof downwards in the past century. The information concerning the structure and engineering of the building is most valuable and we will understand much more about heavy stone masonry in Egypt. The deity to whom the temple at Ain Birbiyeh has been dedicated is known as Amun-Nakht. He is a new god in our knowledge, one who was modeled on

Horus, but with additional features, such as outstretched wings, a spear with which he threatens the enemies, and a general warlike or aggressive mien. He is one who protects the local inhabitants from the evils that lurk in the surrounding desert. Like Horus, his consort is Hathor, and his parentage is from the same standard pantheon as it is in the Nile Valley. He also resembles the god Seth, who is depicted in a relief in the Temple of Hibis at Kharga Oasis, which gives him greater credence as a national figure.

### ***Field Work***

In 2007, we discovered an unusual feature. At the north side of the temple building at its east end, in an area normally without major features, there is a large gateway, partly collapsed, adjacent to the north wall of the temple northern corridor, which seems to lead towards the west. Immediately to the west of this gateway is a large niche on the north face of the wall. We suppose this to have held a large stela originally, although there is only a small bit of evidence to support the idea. In the neighbourhood of the niche, at a level some 0.40 m above the flooring, are several well-laid, flat stone blocks with incisions in the shape of feet, many of which contain the remains of lead, which had been poured as if into a mould. Possibly, these are emplacements for votive statues or some other ritual objects, connected with whatever went on in front of the niche. This particular assembly appears to continue westwards, judging from the contents of the soil at the end of the excavated pit. Further excavation, particularly westwards, will have to be made before this emplacement becomes understandable.

As our excavations continued downwards, outside the north-east corner of the temple, a wall built of reused blocks was discovered, running from the NE corner of the Augustus gateway and turning a right angles and running into the newly found gateway. The configuration of the reused stone structure suggests that the structure was installed when the gateway was already collapsed. On the western side of this walling is a stone pavement and on the eastern side another stone pavement at a lower level than that on the inside. Further excavation westwards will be needed before we can understand the purpose/use of these pavements.

Recording the excavated area at the western end of the south corridor was completed, with photos and mapping, and was then back-filled to within a metre of the top. The doorway to the west at the end of the corridor remains to be examined on the exterior side, but this will have to wait for future seasons.

The Contra-temple, at the extreme western side of the Processional Way, behind the Sanctuary, was an area with a well-decorated wall as a ritual area. It was necessary to examine the western wall of this area, where there is a screen wall that had framing for decorative panels on the western face, but without any relief figures or hieroglyphs. This wall had slumped westwards and had been lined with reused blocks to provide a more vertical interior face. A few fragments of relief were recovered from the triangular gap between the original wall and the secondary one. These have yet to be copied. The flooring of the Contra-temple was also composed, in part, of paving slabs from a roof flooring. The fill of the Contra-temple was largely heavy clay packing, much of which was burnt to an orange colour. At the bottom of the clay fill a stratum of crushed wall plaster intermixed with raw clay was identified. The area was back-filled with clean sand at the end of the season as a protection for the relief panels.

### *Geophysics*

Having proven success at the earlier eastern gateway, the geophysicists were asked again to examine part of the site. Dr. Tomasz Herbich and Dawid Swiech conducted a resistivity survey, coupled with a short magnetic survey, over areas adjacent to the temple structure. They have suggested that there are stone structures or walls only to the south and east of the temple itself. This may be important when we consider the proximity of the Niche and Gateway which lie immediately to the north side. Further work is necessary in these new areas to see what is hidden beneath the surface. A copy of the resulting resistivity map is seen below (illustration I). This has been superimposed on a line drawing plan of the temple. The darkest green coloured areas are those where Dr.

Herbich has found the level of resistivity under the surface and where there are most likely to be found masonry structural remains.

### *Conclusion*

This has been a most successful project. Much of what had to be completed at the end of 2004 has now been done. The Sanctuary epigraphic recording has been satisfactorily completed and we now have the names of five Roman emperors: Augustus, Titus, Galba, Domitian and Hadrian. This information gives insights into the administration of Roman Egypt and particularly, the oasis. It also affords excellent information about the state religion of the period. The evidence in the temple indicates a use of the temple into Late Antiquity and changes of use, from a religious building to, later, an industrial complex. There are rebuilt stone walls and additional stone walls, there are heavy mudbrick walls, many built directly onto the original stone masonry, secondary pavements, and stratified ceramics and other finds of cultural material which will give dating to many of these changes.

The new deity, Amun-Nakht, will be of great interest to historians of religion, with his enhanced iconography and role. The interior architecture of the temple is standard, with two gateways leading to the axis along the Processional Way; but exceptionally there is the newly-discovered north gateway and the nearby niche; the north and south corridors, leading to the west are not a common part and will have to be explained as a part of the temple rituals. So, we have seen the conclusion of work in the Sanctuary chamber, the Contra-temple, the side corridors, the eastern gateway and new north-east gateway. Due to the deterioration of the temple, each feature has been reburied after it was recorded.

Respectfully submitted,

Anthony J. Mills  
Project Director.