Restoring wall paintings of the temple of Tutu

Excavation of the temple of the god Tutu at Kellis in Dakhla Oasis started in 1991 and has revealed vibrant wall paintings of the second century AD. At the EES conference in June 2009 Olaf E Kaper described restoration work on the paintings, partly funded by an EES Excavation Fund grant.

By the Roman Period, Egypt’s unique pharaonic past had been transformed into a new Hellenized identity, with a culture in tune with the rest of the Mediterranean world. How did Egyptian society, and its art, come to change in such a dramatic way? One explanation is that the Ptolemaic royal house was a Greek-speaking dynasty and ruled from the Greek city of Alexandria. But there must also have been a willingness for change among the population that caused people to be proud of their knowledge of the Greek language, with some even adopting Greek names. The new Hellenistic culture became visible in all parts of daily life, but it was only during the period of Roman domination that the changes would finally reach the most conservative sector of Egyptian society, namely its temples. In fact, it is highly remarkable how the priesthood managed to resist foreign influence right up to the second century AD, and, in some places, even longer. The major temples at Dendera, Kom Ombo and Esna continued to be enlarged and there is very little in their appearance that betrays their date of manufacture. The names of the Roman emperors of the day were inscribed on their walls, but they appear in hieroglyphs, a script that was no longer known to people outside a small group of priestly elite.

In addition to the major temples, there were large numbers of smaller sanctuaries, both in the cities and the villages. Most of the village temples of the Roman Period are known only from their mention in papyri, if at all, but several actual buildings are preserved from this period. From these, it is clear that there was more variety in the architecture and decoration of these smaller shrines than we see in the large temples of southern Upper Egypt. The villages in the Fayum, for instance, possessed stone temples with only limited use of relief decoration. By contrast, in the south, the smaller temples could be extensively decorated, as is the case, for instance, in the temples of the Roman Period in and around the town of Koptos. Egyptian temples were ideally built with stone, but some were constructed in mud-brick (adobe). The walls of the temple would be carved with religious images in relief, or in the case of mud-brick buildings, the decoration would take the form of painted plaster. Mud-brick temples of the Roman Period are currently
only known from archaeological remains in the oases of the Western Desert, from Kharga and Dakhla.

A good example of a local village temple from Roman Egypt has been found at Ismant el-Kharab, ancient Kellis. This village has been investigated by Colin Hope for the Dakhleh Oasis Project and one of its surprisingly large villas with Roman wall paintings was described by him in the previous issue of this bulletin (EA 34, pp.20-24). The temple of Kellis consisted of a small-scale sandstone building surrounded by a sizeable complex of subsidiary buildings in mud-brick. The temple was dedicated to the late Egyptian god Tutu, who was most commonly depicted as a walking sphinx. This god was the son of the goddess Neith, and the two were venerated together in Kellis, in addition to a local goddess named Tapsais. The stone temple is not well preserved, but it is clear that it was built in the traditional Egyptian architectural style and it had some relief decoration. There were, however, two columns in classical style inserted into a chapel at the back, the so-called ‘contra temple’.

Next to the stone temple a subsidiary shrine had been added, which counts as one of the most spectacular finds made in the Dakhla Oasis. Excavations started here in 1991 and it soon emerged that this was a chapel built as the mammisi or birth temple of the god Tutu. Nothing similar had ever been encountered before. The chapel consists of a single room preceded by a courtyard. The room, which measures 12m × 4.80m had a vaulted ceiling and it was decorated entirely with wall paintings on plaster in the early second century AD. After the chapel
A brightly-coloured fragmentary painting of Horus

The god Ptah of Memphis shown with a black skin colour

Ongoing work of reconstruction: piecing together an image of Hathor of Dendera with an elaborate crown
had been abandoned in the second half of the fourth century AD, it collapsed and was covered by wind-blown sand. In this state it survived, and our excavations have enabled us to retrieve the full extent of the painted decoration, albeit in small fragments.

The walls of the mammisi remain largely standing, but the decorative scheme of the entire vault has had to be reconstructed out of thousands of tiny fragments of painted plaster. That this has been possible is largely due to the careful excavation techniques, which recorded every fragment among the roof collapse according to its find spot and in relation to the other fragments around it. With support from the EES Excavation Fund, the reconstruction of the paintings progressed significantly in January and February 2009, so that a few larger segments of the painted decoration could be reconstructed.

The mammisi of the temple of Tutu is of great importance for our understanding of the culture of Roman Egypt, because of its singular appearance. The entire decorative scheme has been executed in two different artistic styles side by side. The lower part of the walls and the central band on the ceiling were painted in the Roman style of wall painting, while the rest was in a carefully composed Egyptian (pharaonic) style. The difference in style relates to a difference in content, because the pharaonic paintings depict religious imagery, while the classical paintings are more decorative in nature. The Egyptian paintings depict
Olaf E Kaper is Professor of Egyptology at Leiden University. The excavations of the mammisi were funded by the Australian Research Council (grant to Colin Hope), Monash University, and several other sources. The conservation and restoration of the paintings was funded through a Mellon Distinguished Achievement Award to Roger Bagnall, and in 2009 through an EES Excavation Fund grant. Michelle Berry and Laurence Blondaux are the principal conservators of this mission which is directed by the writer. Photographs by Olaf E Kaper © The Dakhleh Oasis Project.

Above and left: Laurence Blondaux working on the recreation of a large painting from the ceiling of the mammisi showing a goddess as one of the four supports of heaven (see detail below) and a combination of pharaonic and classical decorative motifs.

A goddess representing one of the four supports of heaven, painted on the ceiling of the shrine.

an astonishing number of over 400 images of gods. They contain all the known gods of the Dakhla Oasis, as well as the principal gods of all the provinces of the Nile Valley and others, too numerous to be described here but some can be seen on pp.3-5.

The central element in the rear wall of the room was a classical style niche for the divine statues of Tutu and his mother. In the top of the vault was a broad band of c.3m in width that had been decorated with three different patterns in classical style. The central segment contained a large circular design supported in each of its four corners by a kneeling Egyptian goddess. The goddesses are known from Egyptian depictions of the firmament, such as the circular Zodiac in Dendera, where they depict the four supports of heaven. This means that the painter of the Kellis mammisi knew how to combine imagery from two different artistic traditions. Such a freedom to mix artistic styles has not been observed previously in Egyptian temples.

The ongoing conservation and restoration work at the mammisi should make it possible to reconstruct many of the scenes with their dual decoration. It will be the perfect illustration of a society that is in the process of transformation. In this provincial temple, the old traditions in art were still essential for depicting the ancient gods, but more modern imagery was also admitted. The mammisi of Kellis shows us that the smaller provincial temples could serve as an experimental testing ground because they possessed more freedom to adapt.