

Reviews

Josef Wegner, *The Sunshade Chapel of Meritaten from the House-of-Waenre of Akhenaten*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, ISBN: 9781934536872.

Wegner's 2017 publication addresses a large and rather damaged decorated stone artefact now in the Penn Museum collection in Philadelphia, USA.¹ The 2.38 m tall slab, designated E16230, carries roughly and deeply incised representations of the pharaoh Akhenaten and his eldest daughter Meritaten, but as Wegner explains, its roughness is due to deliberate removal of inlaid decoration and defacement of the monument rather than poor quality relief work by its makers. After being bought in Cairo in 1900, the piece was donated by local Pennsylvanian philanthropist Mr. Jones Wister and was then 'hidden in plain sight' in the Penn Museum for over a century. It was originally assumed to be a stele just over 2m in height, until Egyptologist Cyril Aldred noted that it was more likely to be an architectural element that had been reused as a statue base with a rounded-off end. In 1994, Egyptologist Diane Larkin further theorized that it was in fact one side of a 'broken-lintel doorway'. Wegner's new publication presents a comprehensive study of the piece that has taken place over more than a decade, and the fascinating results of the research read like an archaeological detective story.²

The book consists of 13 chapters subdivided into a quite concise 164 pages, which includes 58 figures, some of them color plates. Given the academic context in which it was produced, it should come as no surprise that the work is published in an extremely professional manner and in a rather traditional format, with a deep red fabric hardback cover, embossed with gold hieroglyphs associated with the artefact in question. The printing and illustrations are of the highest quality throughout and this work should appeal to the many book collectors in the field of Egyptology.

Wegner has extensive experience working as a field archaeologist in Egypt, and applies this expertise to the analysis of the many details the stone carries. An intriguing story of the creation and reuse of the piece gradually emerges; one that spans many centuries and many significant events. The block has turned out to be a rather special architectural element, not only because it is a rare remnant of Amarna era architecture, but because it possibly adorned an otherwise unknown building erected at Heliopolis, within the ancient solar temple, *Akhet-Aten (m Iunu)*, the site of which is found on the northeastern outskirts of modern-day Cairo.

By examining the surviving details, Wegner was able to reconstruct its original architectural function, and the building it was a component of, as well as the rich decorative program that once adorned the building's façade, to a significant extent. In the introduction he describes how the slab once adorned a 'sunshade

1 Our thanks to the peer reviewer for checking and making amendments to this article. Further details regarding the book and the artefact in question are available in a post by Josef Wegner on the University of Pennsylvania Press website here: <https://pennpress.typepad.com/pennpresslog/2017/03/excavating-in-the-galleries.html> and in a Penn Museum online blog post by Page Selinsky here: <https://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/anatomy-of-the-book-the-sunshade-chapel-of-meritaten-from-the-house-of-waenre-of-akhenaten/>

2 The Penn Museum online catalogue entry for the object can be found here: <https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/35223>

chapel' dedicated to the pharaoh Akhenaten's eldest daughter, Meritaten, 'beloved of the Aten'. The rich text in the book describes an architectural jewel box of a chapel, decorated with inlays of faience, semi-precious stones, and gold and silver, highlighting the sacred iconography against a brown quartzite stonework that glittered in the sun.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 constitute a description of the iconography and epigraphic details of the recovered piece, all illustrated with line drawings and photographs. In chapter 6, based on the evidence described and collated in the previous chapters, Wegner presents impressive, detailed, and highly convincing two-dimensional and three-dimensional reconstructions of the chapel. The presentation is a good example of how this type of reconstruction should be done, as opposed to how it is often done by many enthusiasts whose knowledge of computer aided design exceeds that of ancient Egyptian history. All of Wegner's architectural reconstruction choices are firmly based on archaeological evidence as well as iconographic evidence from tombs contemporary to the period.

The three-dimensional renderings of the building that emerge are of the highest quality. The façade was shaped like a tall pylon, traversed by a horizontal cornice split into two parts forming an interrupted lintel over the main doorway. This portal led into a room open to the sky, a *hypaethral* chapel typical of the period. For this reviewer, the only regrets were that any iconography that may have adorned the substantial doors at the chapel's entrance was not addressed, and there was not much discussion placing this special inlaid façade within the wider context of the many multi-colored artworks of the 18th dynasty.

In chapter 2, Wegner traces out the block's post-Amarna period journey for the first time, a theme he returns to in more detail in chapters 10, 11, and 12. After its initial installation on the chapel and the demise of the Amarna monarchy, the block was deliberately defaced to erase mention of the Amarna royal family, before the building was dismantled. Later in the 19th dynasty, the block was re-worked and re-used and inscriptions were added, making a statue base, most probably for a sphinx statue dedicated to the pharaoh Merneptah. Many centuries later, the block was separated from the sphinx and hauled to Islamic Cairo, where it was used as a threshold for an important administrative or commercial building. Wegner provides a detailed discussion of the detective work that was able to re-construct this itinerary, but this reviewer felt that the symbolic aspects of this pharaonic block's reuse could have been addressed in some more depth. There is a growing literature on the symbolic concepts and apotropaic value of spolia in the ancient world, which could have been referenced here, and it would have been interesting to consider the re-use of such blocks within a wider theoretical and ritual framework that was not limited by Egyptological concerns and conventions.

In chapters 7 through 9, Wegner begins to place the block and the associated chapel building within the wider Amarna-era architectural context, with respect to both ground plans and institutional functions. Despite the fact that there remains significant uncertainty over the original location of the piece, Wegner negotiates a complex discussion of the Amarna period's pharaonic architecture, at Amarna and elsewhere in Egypt such as at Memphis, and he draws some useful conclusions. Akhenaten's architectural program placed the royal family close to the supreme solar god, so that it seems difficult to differentiate temples from palaces and administrative buildings at that time. Wegner nevertheless shows that the effort to move focus onto a supposedly supreme royal family and away from many of the traditional gods was not limited to Amarna, and applied throughout Egypt, in an attempt to overlay and subsume the existing religious framework under the new regime. As we now know, this effort was a failure, and the Amarna monarchy was expunged from subsequent ancient Egyptian history, along with the majority of its architecture. Wegner acknowledges on page 111 that the architecture of the Amarna period is, as a result, far from well understood, but he nevertheless makes a valiant attempt to describe the organizational and spatial arrangement of comparable Amarna-era temples at Heliopolis, Memphis, and in Amarna itself. Based on the discussion, he places Meritaten's sunshade chapel within a temple of *Waenre*, 'The Unique one of Aten', which lay within the wider Heliopolitan temple complex which was then referred to, just like comparable buildings at Memphis and Amarna, as an *Akhet-Aten*, a 'horizon of the Aten'.

Chapters 4 and 10 address the implications of the changes made to the incised iconography on the slab, most importantly those made to the cartouches, which are in some places palimpsests that retain details of earlier versions of Akhenaten's titles. This issue leads into discussions of the political and familial details of

the Amarna period, which Wegner politely describes as an intricate history. Great volumes of ink have been spilled over the demise of the Amarna era, and towards the end of the book Wegner briefly enters the fray, presenting his viewpoint of who did what and how it all culminated. Most importantly perhaps, Wegner subscribes to the viewpoint that Nefertiti did not disappear during year 12, and that she may have become a co-regent with her husband (at which point Meritaten received the title, *hmt nswt wrt*, or 'great royal wife'), before a series of untimely deaths signaled the end of the idiosyncratic Amarna period.

From an academic and scholarly point of view, this is a high-quality publication throughout. The book is thoroughly complete with detailed references, a lengthy bibliography, and usefully enumerated notes placed at the end of each chapter. From a technical point of view, the only omission seemed to be a lack of north-arrows or compasses on maps. With reconstructions based on loose architectural elements it is often not possible to define what direction a building was oriented, but for archaeological excavation plans and geographical maps these arrows should be included systematically, particularly when the maps were printed in landscape view as well as portrait. In fact, the issue of orientation seems to be one that could have been considered in more detail. There is evidence that monumental buildings of ancient Egypt, including of the Amarna period, were aligned with the cardinal directions, or to solar rising and setting points on the horizon, or were designed with decorative programs that were responsive to local landscapes and the wider geographical contexts in which the monuments were built.

Overall, the book is an exemplary publication of an interesting and seemingly overlooked museum artefact. It includes an impressive reconstructive effort and is well presented and edited throughout. The text was always readable, despite the highly detailed and technical subject matter being addressed, something that is not typical in academic publications. Wegner's book is an important documentary complement to the quartzite artefact on which it focuses.

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