The Luxor Temple Cachette
Preliminary report on the discovery of the New Kingdom statues at the Temple of Luxor by the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation

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The discovery of the Luxor statue cachette in early 1989 was the greatest find in the Theban area in recent years. It was a memorable event when these extraordinary sculptures, in near perfect condition, came to light on January the 22nd during a routine soil test in the main court of Luxor Temple, erected by Amenhotep III (1405-1370 BC). On this day, workmen engaged in collecting soil samples came upon a slab of finely smoothed stone. Since this unexpected discovery seemed to be especially significant, I decided to continue clearing around the stone and to keep watch on the progress of the excavation to ensure the safety of the object. Within two hours of further clearance, the excavation yielded a beautiful, intact plinth on top of which were cut two recesses, originally prepared for the placement of two statues of different size. The plinth was fashioned in dark diorite and carefully polished, measuring 151.5 cm long, 50 cm wide and 24.5 cm high.

The next day, after removing the plinth from the excavation, the face and shoulder of a statue in quartzite emerged in the vicinity. The complete clearance around this statue took until midday, when inscriptions on the base of the statue revealed the name of the owner as Nebmaatre Amenhotep-Hekawaset (Amenhotep III). To our great surprise and pleasure, the almost life-size reddish-sculpture was intact and in a very good state of preservation. The perfection of the statue, its fine quality, the beauty of its proportions and unusual iconography - all these aspects, together with parts of other statues visible in the baulks on either side of the Amenhotep III sculpture, lent to the cachette a majestic atmosphere and attracted our attention to its importance and its richness. After a few minutes of hesitation, I decided to stop the work temporarily, and the sounding was refilled by covering the statues with clean sand.

Two weeks later, after having made certain that any further digging would not threaten the surrounding columns of the court, I ordered work resumed on the 9th of February. On the first day, Mr Farouk Hosni, Minister of Culture, Dr Sayed Tawfiq, Chairman of the EAO, and Dr Ali Hassan, president of the Egyptian antiquities sector, were present, as well as the staff under my direction. At my instruction, the trained workmen who were waiting nearby began to dig in order to uncover the royal statue and the other contents of the cachette. After a few hours of painstaking work, five fabulous intact statues came to light: pristine sculptures of Amenhotep III, Hathor, Iunyt, Horemheb, and Atum were unearthed at a depth of 2.5 meters below ground level. The five statues were found lying side by side, as if comforting one another. The sculpture of Amenhotep III was

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on its right side in the middle of the group; Hathor and Junyt were on the east side with Horemheb and Atum on the west. They had been carefully placed in this position during antiquity and were probably seen last by the priests who had hidden them in order to prevent their destruction when the temple of Luxor was transformed into a Roman camp in the 3rd century AD.

The following day (10th February), on a visit from Aswan to the temple site, President Mubarak enjoyed viewing these five imposing statues of almost peerless quality. He immediately gave orders for displaying all the finds in Luxor, their place of origin, instead of sending them away to the Cairo Museum. The idea was immediately put into effect and the necessary executive steps were undertaken at once. A suitable fund was assigned for completing the excavations and a special hall in the Luxor Museum was set aside for the purpose of displaying the imposing finds.

Two weeks later, the five statues were transferred to the store rooms for the purpose of recording, cleaning, restoring, and consolidation. Then the excavation was resumed again. In the level directly beneath the original find, our workmen once again came upon a new series of sculptures placed side by side in the cachette, at a depth of 3.0 meters below ground level. The work had been concentrated in the original pit of the cachette, which measured 3.8 metres south to north by 3.0 metres east to west. The work this time resulted in the discovery of twenty more sculptures; some of them were not as complete as the first five, but all were of considerable archaeological and artistic interest.

These statues were individually transferred, each according to the date and time of discovery, to the temporary storage rooms, where some conservation measures could be undertaken. The excavation lasted until the 20th of April 1989, when the last piece was found at a depth of 4.5 meters below ground level, or one meter below the water-table. The last fragment found was the beard of a statue of Amun which had been discovered on March the 28th. To be certain that no more objects had been left in the pit, another meter of soil below the water-table was probed with iron bars. On the 29th of April the pit was refilled, after

Transferring the seated statue of Junyt from the discovery site in the court of Amenhotep III at Luxor Temple to the Luxor Museum magazines. [Photo by courtesy of M. el-Saghir]

a stone retaining wall had been built within it, in order to avoid any collapse of the ground along the western row of columns in the Amenhotep III court.

The discovery of the statues of Junyt (left), Amenhotep III (centre), and the statue pair of Horemheb (holding nw pots) and Atum (seated) at the rear. [Photo by courtesy of M. el-Saghir]