The Great Processional Way of Thebes
A report on the EAO excavations of 1948-1974 and 1984 onwards

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Between 1948 and 1974, during the excavation of up to six identifiable settlement strata of Roman and Islamic Luxor, an EAO archaeological team under the direction of Zakaria Ghoneim discovered a series of walls marking out a large area immediately to the north of the first pylon at Luxor Temple. Beginning at the northernmost of these walls, the now famous avenue of sphinxes was unearthed, its threshold marked by a granite stela.1

For the approximately 200 meters of its length in front of the Luxor Temple which have been so far revealed, the avenue was found to be bounded on its east and west sides by mudbrick walls, 30 meters apart. Running between the two rows of sphinxes was a central pavement consisting of two layers of sandstone blocks, the upper course being 5.70 meters wide. Each sphinx and its base were carved from a single block of sandstone and set on a pedestal at an average distance of 4.35 meters from the edge of the pavement. During the recent years of excavation in the Luxor region it has become apparent that the avenue of sphinxes once directly linked the sanctuaries of Luxor and Karnak, functioning as a processional way during specific annual religious ceremonies and festivals. With roughly three meters separating each sphinx from its neighbour, it is possible to estimate that there were originally some 700 sphinxes along the processional way between the two great religious centres of Thebes.

More recent EAO excavations to the south of Karnak have demonstrated that the avenue of sphinxes which starts in front of the Luxor Temple does not connect directly, as originally thought, with the Khonsu Temple dromos of ram-headed sphinxes at Karnak (erected by Herihor utilising material from the mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III).2 Instead, the clearance of this dromos has revealed that the croo-sphinxes lead to a quay, which was in turn connected to the Nile by a canal. On the other hand, another team of EAO excavators working to the west of Abu el-Gud, was able to confirm that the sphinxes leading from the Temple of Luxor did indeed run at least that far north.

Yet another EAO excavation, now in progress to the west of the Mut Precinct (just south of the Amun Precinct at Karnak), has now succeeded in putting together another vital piece of the jigsaw by uncovering what must be the north end of the processional way, where it joins an east-west paved roadway which eventually runs under the modern village to the west. Thus, at its northern end, the avenue turns to the east, towards the main entrance of the Mut Precinct. Another avenue of sphinxes (in all probability

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1. Key
   A - Nectanebo Dromos, excavated by the EAO (1948-1974)
   B - EAO excavation (1984-1987)
   C - EAO excavation (1984-1987)
   D - EAO excavation (1987 onwards)
   E - Avenue of Herihor croo-sphinxes.
   F - Avenue of sphinxes probably built by Tutankhamun.

Route of the grand processional way between the temple complexes of Karnak and Luxor as determined by the EAO excavations. [Illustration: E. Hegazy]

82 JACF VOL. 3
the work of Tutankhamun and Ay), then runs south from the Amun Temple’s tenth pylon in order to connect up with the north end of the processional way from Luxor in front of the entrance to the Mut enclosure.

The avenue of sphinxes at the Luxor Temple end of the processional way may be attributed with reasonable certainty to Nectanebo I due to the style of sculpture (so typical of the Late Period) and the fact that the bases of the sphinxes bear an inscription containing the cartouches of this king (see above). Those sphinxes which are preserved sufficiently to permit stylistic analysis are characterised by a certain stoutness of the face with lips drawn up into a pleasant smile. Both these characteristics are found in other works of the 30th Dynasty and the sphinxes resemble the hieroglyph sign representing nb (‘lord’) employed in Nectanebo I’s nomen. Moreover, we may note that they are remarkably similar to the sphinxes of Nepherites I and Hakoris now housed in the Louvre (despite the clumsy restorations of the Renaissance craftsmen from which these two sculptures have suffered). Hence there is no compelling reason to doubt that the text of Nectanebo (preserved on 60 out of the 68 sphinxes uncovered in front of the Luxor Temple and a few of the sphinxes near the Mut Precinct) is original to, and contemporary with, the sculpture.

On each side of the base of one of the more complete sphinxes unearthed near the Mut Precinct Nectanebo’s usual titulary is followed by:

...‘nh nfr s3 b n n hm n.f.
mi r f t3-tin lir n.f di ‘nh qf

... may the good god live, wise through knowledge; there is nothing he does not know, like his father Tatenen. He made (this sculpture) given life forever.

It is true that only a more complete excavation of the processional way can provide the confirmation we need that Nectanebo I constructed the entire avenue of sphinxes, but at this time this is the most likely case. Further excavation may also reveal whether or not the construction of the avenue of sphinxes entailed the removal of previous structures, possibly including an earlier processional way, which may have been built during the New Kingdom. However, at the time of writing it is possible to say:

1. that there are earlier blocks re-used in the foundations built to support some of the later Nectanebo sphinxes; and

2. scenes in some New Kingdom Theban tombs suggest that an avenue of sphinxes did exist in that period.

The Nectanebo Dromos as it appeared at the end of the 1948-1974 excavations. [Photo: EAO]
Notes and References


This article is dedicated to the memory of Reis Aly Fikry

Above: The northern end of the great avenue (F), leading to the Tenth Pylon of the Amun precinct at Karnak.

Left: One of the Nectanebo sphinxes which guards the southern end of the Great Processional Way at Luxor.

Bottom: Left: The EAO Director of Karnak and Luxor Temples, Dr Elsayed Hegazy, with Reis Eisa Fikry, the brother of Reis Aly Fikry, foreman of many of the EAO Luxor excavations, and to whom this article is dedicated.

Bottom Right: The smiling features so typical of the Late Period sphinxes of Nectanebo.