Rediscovering Karnak in the Sheikh Labib Storerooms

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The precinct of the Temple of Amun at Karnak has been the subject of intensive archaeological probing for much of this century. In the course of these excavations a great variety of objects have been discovered, ranging from mere fragments to beautifully carved statues of Amenhotep I and Thutmose II. Because of the vast number of such objects, they were stored, mainly by H. Chevrier, in gigantic open-air museums. Most of the statues have since been taken to Cairo, including the marvelous series recovered from the Karnak-Cachette. However, the smaller pieces still lie in a former workshop of Georges Legrain’s situated to the south of the great court, which Chevrier turned into a closed storage area known as the 'Sheikh Labib'. Intended to be a temporary measure, the Sheikh Labib soon became a dumping ground for every block or fragment found in the Temple. Thus it is now almost a cache of forgotten treasures in its own right.

In 1984 the Antiquities Organisation at Karnak decided to impose some order on the storage area and draw up a detailed inventory. Concrete slabs were laid down to give protection against damp caused by rises in the water table. Shelves were erected to relieve the congestion and improve access. Objects were arranged on the shelves according either to their type or to their period. After the preparatory work, the Organisation began slowly and systematically to rediscover the treasures in its keeping; a labour on which, nine years later, it is still engaged. Each item, big or small, beautiful or plain, is being photographed and whatever is known about it catalogued. In due course all the files will be transferred onto computer, thereby creating a resource which it is hoped will enable researchers to put some of the pieces of the gigantic jigsaw puzzle known as Karnak back in their place.

Among the thousands of artifacts which have so far escaped the notice of scholars, I should like to present three small monuments dating from the reign of the 30th-Dynasty king, Nectanebo I (380-363 BC).

The first two objects are small sandstone sphinxes. Both are set on a rectangular base decorated with a single line of text. Unfortunately, the heads of the sphinxes are not preserved, but some idea of the gentle, smiling faces which they are likely to have exhibited may be gathered from the avenue of sphinxes which leads up to the Luxor Temple. From one of the sphinxes the upper portion of the front of the body is also missing. Its existing dimensions are height 35.5 cm, width 28cm and length 87cm. Thus it is a fairly small example of monumental statuary. The second sphinx, from which the front paws are missing, seems to have been its twin.

In both examples the body of the animal is gently rounded and shows little anatomical detail, being rendered...
in what could be called a generalising manner.

On the first sphinx is preserved an almost complete titulary of Nectanebo I which can be assembled from the undamaged sections of the left and right sides of the base:

The strong-armed Horus [beloved of] the Two Ladies who beautify the Two Lands, who make what the gods love, the Dual King, Kheperkare, the Son of Re, Nectanebo …

The left side of the second sphinx is inscribed:

[The strong-armed Horus] Kheperkare, the son of Re, Lord of the Crowns, Nectanebo, beloved of Amun.

The right side preserves a fuller text of the same titulary.

Thus the dating of the two objects is not a problem. Both can clearly be assigned to the reign of Nectanebo I, a period which is also in keeping with the style of the statues. Understood as a pair, they could have decorated the pylon-shaped walls of a tribune gateway or some such structure.

The third item is a fragment of pink granite 35cm high, 77cm wide and 36cm in thickness. The decorated face preserves portions of two back-to-back scenes in sunken relief, separated by two ankh-signs. These signs, the bottoms of which deviate from the vertical, hang from uraeus-snakes (cobras) which must have been associated with the winged solar disk rising above the scene. Under this representation of the solar deity, a column of text divides the decoration into two parallel sections. The text, which begins ‘given life and protection …’, seems to have been a stanza invoking divine protection. By placing the di and ankh signs between the two cobras, the sculptor in effect frames the text within two vertical lines.

Most of the right-hand portion of the decoration is extant. Here we see the upper torso and head of a king looking to the right. He wears the royal nemes headdress and holds nw pots in his raised hands, offering wine or some other beverage to an unknown deity. Above his head runs a text which gives part of his titulary in three columns:

The perfect god, Lord of the Two Lands, Kheperkare, given life like Re.

The scenes must have been painted, for the head-dress still retains traces of red pigment.

Of the similar scene to the left only a small part remains. It shows the rear of the nemes head-dress, the king this time facing left, and part of the concluding words of the above text: ‘[given] life like [Re],’

Apart from the irregularly worn surface of the stone itself, we may observe that the style of the sculpture is flat and uninspired. This makes the question of date rather difficult. Some years ago, a specialist in Middle Kingdom monuments suggested to me that it belonged to the reign of King Senusert I. However, a close study of the signs and of the king’s face points to a much lower date. The prominent rounded nose, the somewhat rounded head and the smallness of the eye all recall the relief sculpture of the Late Period.
Thus a better date would be the reign of Nectanebo I, who, hoping to emulate the glory of the 12th Dynasty in his own reign, chose the same nomen as Senuseret I: Kheperkare.

To what kind of monument did this block belong? The contents and general design of the decoration suggests the rounded upper part of a stela which depicted the king in a double scene offering to either one deity or two different deities. However, the smooth upper and lower surfaces show that the fragment is one block of a number making up the scene, whereas stelae were usually made from single stone slabs.

The most striking feature of the monument is the disposition of the figures in the decoration. While a back-to-back arrangement is common, such symmetry nearly always centres around the deity, not the king, whether the monument be a stela or a wall carving. Here, although the king is making an offering to a higher power, he appears to be the centre of the composition. It is a tantalising thought that the rest of the decoration may still be preserved in the Sheikh Labib (or in some other storeroom of the EAO) waiting to illuminate this mystery.