

# Recent work in the Mut precinct at South Karnak

The Brooklyn Museum Archaeological Expedition to the Temple Precinct of the Goddess Mut at South Karnak has been excavating the site since 1976. **Richard Fazzini** and **Jacobus van Dijk** report on the most recent work in one of the two large temples in the precinct.

Since its inception in 1976, one of the main goals of the Brooklyn Museum expedition has been to elucidate the history of the Mut precinct and its religious structures. Since 2002, when the expedition began to share the site with an expedition from the Johns Hopkins University, the main focus of Brooklyn's work has been the area north of the Mut temple's first pylon. Among our more important discoveries about the site's history has been that the area north of the Mut temple proper was originally called Ipet or Opet. Until the Twenty Fifth Dynasty, Temple A, in the north-east corner of the present precinct, was outside the Mut precinct, which was called 'house of Mut' and Isheru, after the name of its sacred lake. In the late New Kingdom, Temple A was a 'Temple of Millions of Years' dedicated to Ramesses II and presumably other kings who followed him. There is inscriptional evidence, however, that by the Twenty First Dynasty Temple A had begun to function as a *mammisi* or 'birth-house' dedicated to the cult of the repeating birth of a child-god or gods and the divine birth of kings. Here the divine progeny was Khonsu or Khonsu-the-child, offspring of Amun and Mut. The

Twenty Fifth Dynasty expansion of the Mut precinct to include Temple A and its extensive rebuilding presumably resulted from this change in function.

One of the main facets of the expedition's season of work from December 2006 to March 2007 was the further investigation of Temple A. In earlier seasons we had partially excavated a Roman Period drainage system in brick, stone and terracotta. This season its excavation was completed, uncovering what is left of the forecourt's paving. We also continued the work begun in 2006 at the south side of the forecourt, where we have uncovered remains of a New Kingdom limestone wall and colonnade and of a later mud-brick wall with baked-brick repairs.

Beneath the brick debris from the enclosure wall which covers the north side of the forecourt we discovered the remains of a limestone wall and colonnade, framed on the south by a sandstone colonnade and on the north by a wide sandstone wall. These both apparently belong to the Twenty Fifth Dynasty rebuilding of the temple which included construction of the present Second Pylon forming the forecourt's east side. The excavations on the north



*An aerial view of the trapezoidal Mut precinct from the north. In the centre is the Mut Temple with the sacred lake called the Isheru. Temple A is in the precinct's lower left corner*



Looking south-east at Temple A and its forecourt from the enclosure wall. The north wall and remains of the colonnade are to the left, with the Roman Period drain to the right

side of the forecourt, supervised by William Peck, turned up a thin sandstone slab (110cm × 45cm × 8cm) resting against the enclosure wall. When turned over, it proved to be a partially-gilded raised relief lintel of Ptolemaic or possibly early Roman date. It shows on the left five child-gods, each seated on a lotus from which they have just emerged, a well-known motif depicting the birth of the god. All five are covered from top to toe with gold leaf. They are shown virtually identically, naked except for a wide sky-blue cape hanging around their shoulders, with a finger in their mouths and wearing the side-lock of youth. In their right hands they hold the crook and flail.

The five gods are distinguished only by their crowns and by the inscriptions, which have been lightly incised on extremely fragile strips of plaster. Not surprisingly, they are all linked to the god Amun, whose annually rejuvenated self they represent. The first four gods are all called 'the very great first-born child of Amun'; their names are Khonsu (with crescent and full moon), Horus (with the tall feathers of the crown of Amun), Harpre (with the composite *hemhem* crown) and Somtus ('Uniter of the Two Lands', with the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt). All four have epithets linking them with the provision of food, such as 'lord of food, rich of sustenance', 'who provides food for all people', and 'who gives to the one whom he loves and feeds everyone'. The last of the five gods is shown with the same headgear as the first; he is called 'Khonsu-



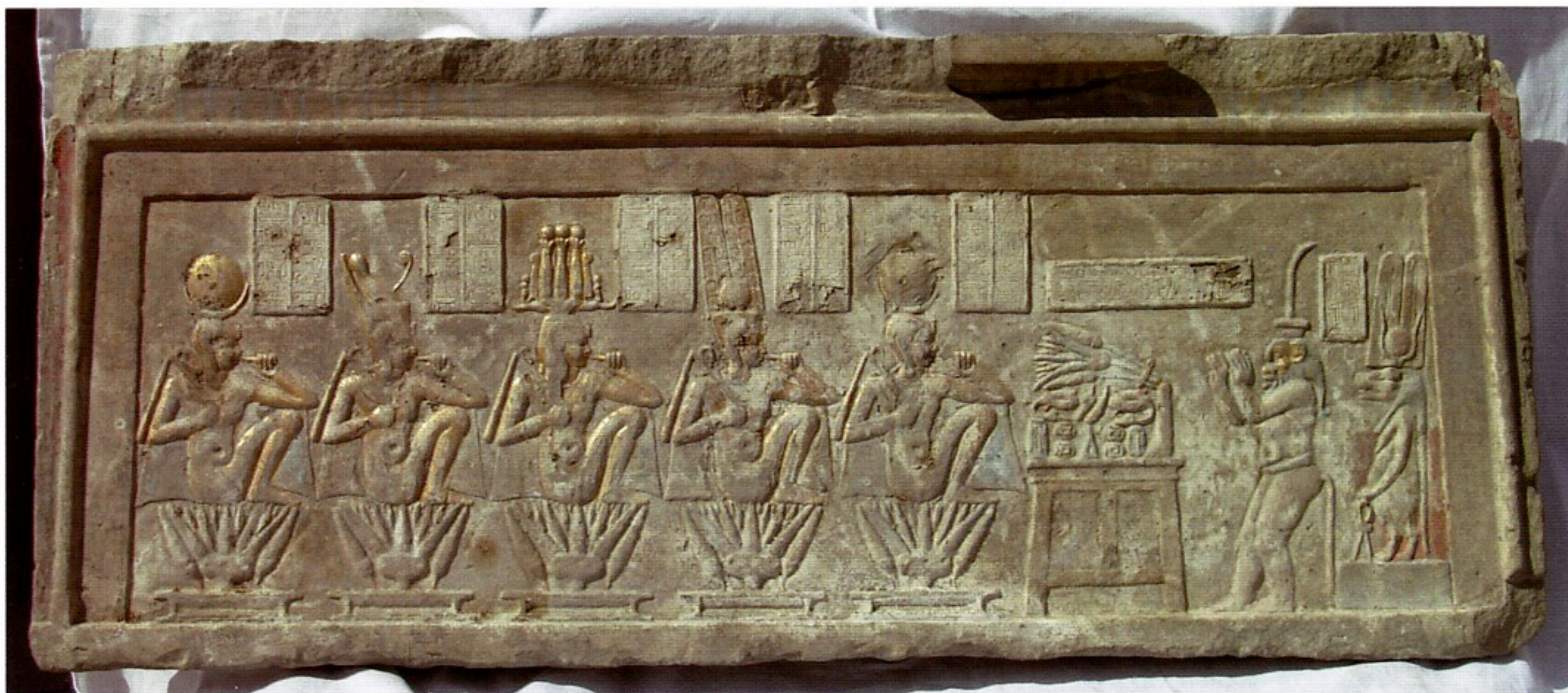
The north side of Temple A's forecourt with the lintel (marked by an arrow) leaning against the newly-revealed face of the precinct's enclosure wall

Thoth of Amenope, who gives years (i.e. a long life) to the one who is loyal to him'. These gods may well represent various local forms of the child-god, headed by Khonsu-the-Child, whose birth was celebrated in the Mut precinct's *mammisi*, followed by Horus of the Karnak Opet temple, Harpre of Armant, Somtus of Edfu, and finally Khonsu of Luxor Temple.

On the right of the scene are two further deities; the first, a Bes-like figure called Ashaikhet ('Rich of possessions'), stands facing the child-gods with both arms raised in adoration. He is associated with the annual return of the crops and is here also said to 'afford protection to

Khonsu in the Birth-House'. Behind him is a hippopotamus goddess called 'She who is in heaven, who guides the gods'. She is one of twelve hippopotamus goddesses often depicted in the birth houses of various temples, one for each month of the year. This particular goddess is associated with the fourth month of the winter season, the period of abundant growth leading up to the harvest festival celebrated on the first day of the following month. Between these deities and the child-gods is a richly laden offering table. The whole scene is clearly linked not only to the birth of the child-god in the *mammisi* but also to the annual regeneration of the vegetation that feeds all of mankind. Child-gods are often associated with food: just as they are fed by their divine mother, so they in turn are able to provide nourishment to the inhabitants of Egypt.

Unfortunately, the absence of royal names on the lintel makes it very difficult to date it more precisely. However, the scene is framed on three sides by a further long text,



The lintel after treatment by the Brooklyn Museum and Luxor Museum conservators

written in ink on plaster and all but illegible to the naked eye. Despite the heroic efforts of the joint Luxor and Brooklyn restorers it has so far been impossible to read more than a few disconnected phrases. It is very much hoped that infra-red photography will reveal more of this interesting text during the coming season.

We do not know which building this lintel originally adorned. The problem is that Khonsu as a child-god and the epithet 'the very great first-born child of Amun' are not limited at Thebes to southern Karnak. However, child-gods often do not have their own temples but are worshipped together with their mothers in a *mammisi*.

Temple A had unquestionably been a *mammisi* since the reigns of Shabaka and Taharqa of the Twenty Fifth Dynasty (c.760-656 BC) and remained one at least throughout the Ptolemaic Period (305-30 BC), as shown by renovations to the building, and possibly into the Roman Period. Furthermore, this year's work also revealed a possible limestone shrine in the forecourt's north-west corner and, nearby, the baked brick and sandstone foundations of a small free-standing building, either of which could have been the lintel's original home.

The lintel's squatting child-gods on lotuses are of a type that had its origins and first flourish between the late Twen-



Khonsu-Thoth of Amenope, one of the five gilded child-gods, wearing a blue cape and seated on a lotus. The fragile plaster in which the inscriptions were incised survived amazingly well



Ashaikhet (left) and the hippopotamus goddess



tieth Dynasty and the Twenty Fifth Dynasty (c.1080-656 BC), during which time it also entered the iconography of Phoenician art. With the rise in the prominence of child-god theology during the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods came a significant revival of this type of image. Indeed, nineteenth century drawings of the then-preserved walls of the *mammisi* at Armant built by the famous Cleopatra VII (51-30 BC) show rows of seated child-gods as well as child-gods squatting on lotuses flanked by protective deities somewhat similar to those on our lintel. Similar depictions occur in the sanctuary of the late Ptolemaic *mammisi* at Edfu and in the second *mammisi* at Dendera of Trajan (AD 98-117) and Hadrian (AD 117-138). Placed near the tops of walls, these scenes from temples not far removed from Thebes show that our lintel's type of decoration was at home in southern Egypt in the late Ptolemaic and Roman Periods.

A striking feature of the lintel is its gilding. Reliefs that are gilded as well as painted are usually thought to be rare in Egypt because gilding is seldom well preserved. However, one of the sanctuary walls of the Edfu Temple *mammisi* with child-god scenes related to our lintel's also bore traces of gilding. The apparent scarcity of gilded reliefs has as much to do with the value of the material (gold) to later looters as with its actual rarity.



*The lintel may have come from either a small chapel set into the extreme north-west corner of the forecourt (indicated by an arrow) or from the free-standing building whose remains are in the foreground*

□ Richard Fazzini has retired from the Brooklyn Museum as Curator of Egyptian, Classical, and Ancient Middle Eastern Art, but remains the Head of the Brooklyn Museum's Expedition to the Precinct of Mut, which he initiated in 1976. Jacobus van Dijk is Associate Professor of Egyptology at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He has been working with the Brooklyn Expedition as philologist and epigrapher since 1986. Major support for the 2007 season of fieldwork was provided by the Brooklyn Museum's Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, with additional support from William and Elsie Peck, Richard Fazzini and Mary McKercher. Photographs: Mary McKercher for the Brooklyn Museum.