

Ramesses I and the Building of the Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak Revisited

by William J. Murnane

An evening spent at home with "Azzouz" Sadek and his wife Cynthia was an occasion filled with laughter and wide-ranging conversation which (by mutual concession to the interests all three of us shared) always managed to come back to Egyptology. This short study is offered in fond memory of the erudite and genial host who presided over these gatherings.

The walls of the Great Hypostyle Hall in the Temple of Amun at Karnak have long been a quarry for scholars seeking to mine historical insights from them. Among the most persistent problems is the date of the hall itself. Although the most straightforward interpretation of the reliefs inside the building suggests that it was begun by Sety I and finished under his son, Ramesses II,¹ several scholars have proposed an earlier date. Auguste Mariette² and Georges Legrain³ both maintained that Ramesses I conceived and even initiated work on converting the space between the Second and Third Pylons into a columned hall. Keith C. Seele went even further in an attempt to demonstrate that Ramesses I, "possibly in association with his son Seti I," started decorating the substantially completed hall before he died.⁴ His arguments assume, first, that Ramesses I himself was responsible for carving a number of reliefs which bear his name in the top register of the north wing of the west wall inside the hall;⁵ and second, that the position of these scenes (in the top register of the new building, inscribed over the erased original reliefs on the Second Pylon) suggests they were carved very soon after the building was finished, before any of its columns (which bear no text of Ramesses I) had been disengaged from the earth fill used in its construction. This last, of course, is an argument from silence: it is pointless to speculate why Ramesses I never decorated any of the columns inside the Great Hypostyle Hall if it was only built after his death. Moreover, attributing to Ramesses I the five scenes in his name on the west wall is by no means an easy matter. In one of these scenes Ramesses I is described as *m3c-hrw*,⁶ which can connote that he was "deceased" -- but this epithet could also have been employed *sub specie aeternitatis* here, and not meant "literally" at the time the scene was carved.⁷ Moreover, the scenes which name Ramesses I in this register share it with two others belonging to Sety I -- and one of these comes between two of the scenes assigned to Ramesses I.⁸ While such an arrangement

¹ See P. Barguet, *Le temple d'Amon-Ré à Karnak*, RIFAO 21 (Cairo, 1962), pp. 59-63.

² *Karnak* (Paris, 1875), pp. 23-4.

³ *Les temples de Karnak* (Brussels, 1929), pp. 154-6.

⁴ *The Coregency of Ramses I with Seti I and the Date of the Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak*, SAOC 19 (Chicago, 1940), pp. 12-13 (§§ 23-25), 19-22 (§§ 33-38).

⁵ H. H. Nelson, *The Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak*, Vol. I.1, *The Wall Reliefs*, ed. W. J. Murnane, OIP 106 (Chicago, 1981), pls. 138, 140-142.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pl. 142 (while in the other four scenes of this series he is described as "given life like Re").

⁷ W. J. Murnane, *Ancient Egyptian Coregencies*, SAOC 40 (Chicago, 1977), pp. 270-272.

⁸ See Nelson, *Great Hypostyle Hall* I.1, pls. 139 (within the sequence of scenes which name Ramesses I) and 143 (at the north end of the register).

could be compatible with a coregency, as Seele had suggested, that supposition is weakened by the fact that *all* the scenes in this register lie beneath a frieze of royal names⁹ which belong solely to Sety I. Even conceding that this element could have been carved after the scenes in the register below, it seems unwise to insist on Ramesses I's original authorship of material which lies in an area otherwise dominated by his son.

There is also a stronger reason for doubting Ramesses I's personal involvement with decorating this part of the hall. The upper register of the west wall's northern wing consists, as we have noted, of seven scenes: counting from right to left, the first and sixth of these belong to Sety I – and in the latter Sety is shown offering a conical loaf to "Seth, great of strength, residing in the Mansion 'Glorious is Sety-Merneptah' in the Estate of Amun,"¹⁰ which is the name of the Great Hypostyle Hall. Legrain and Seele both used this detail to bolster their conviction that Ramesses I died soon after he had initiated the decoration of the hall with his son -- for the elder king "while still living would scarcely have tolerated any cartouche but his in the name of the mightiest colonnaded hall in Egypt."¹¹ If so, however, is it not disturbing to find a reference to the hall as Sety I's building *within* a sequence of tableaux which is alleged to have been carved during the coregency, while Ramesses I still lived? Since the cartouche in the building's name contains the original, unaltered nomen of Sety I, the only remaining way around this difficulty is to assume that the central portion of this scene's text must have remained uninscribed until after the old king's death, while everything else in the sequence (except, possibly, the cartouche of Ramesses I *m3C-hrw*) was already completed. This, clearly, will not do. If the reliefs in this section were treated normally -- i.e., if they were fully carved at one time and in a sequence which does not strain belief -- then the name of the building as it appears in the sixth scene should indicate that all this work took place during the sole reign of Sety I. If such is the case, that scenario is far from supporting a coregency. What it suggests instead is that Sety I caused the scenes which name Ramesses I to be carved as a memorial¹² or some other gesture of homage to him -- but why?

Since 1991 the Institute of Egyptian Art and Archaeology (University of Memphis) has been engaged in a project at Karnak which aims to complete the epigraphic record of decoration at the Great Hypostyle Hall. Focussing on the east end of the passage through the Second Pylon, our work to date has added substantially to the evidence adduced in the pioneering studies of Legrain and Seele for Ramesses I's role in decorating this building. This "new" material is on both sides of the passage at its east end, beyond the recesses for the great doorleaves, and consists of five registers (with two scenes in each) which show the king entering the temple and celebrating rituals there. Although these scenes have long been known, their relevance was not sensed previously because, in their present state, they were manifestly carved under Ptolemy VI and could

⁹ Faithfully drawn by Nelson (*ibid.*) above the scenes illustrated in pls. 138-143. The presence of this frieze was acknowledged by Seele, *Coregency*, p. 12 (§ 23), but he did not explore its implications.

¹⁰ Nelson, *Great Hypostyle Hall* I.1, pl. 139.

¹¹ Seele, *Coregency*, p. 13 (§ 25).

¹² Cf. Murnane, "The Earlier Reign of Ramesses II and his Coregency with Sety I," *JNES* 34.3 (1975):170-1, although the evidence was somewhat misstated here.

thus be regarded as an exclusively ptolemaic inspiration.¹³ Decisive evidence to the contrary was found in 1993, however, when collation of these scenes brought out numerous traces of the original Nineteenth Dynasty versions which had been restored in the second century (following a collapse of the central nave's roof into the passage).¹⁴ These original reliefs had been usurped by Ramesses II (whose cartouches were faithfully restored in the second century B.C.E.); but in several places the original cartouches survived -- and traces both numerous and strong beneath the usurpations in these royal names revealed, in the end, their original "owner," Ramesses I.¹⁵

Foreshadowing his redoubtable grandson, then, the founder of the Nineteenth Dynasty is seen taking possession of a monument which was not his own. It was already known that Ramesses I usurped his predecessor's cartouches and added material of his own on the façade of Horemheb's Second Pylon and its porch. This process of conversion can now be shown to have extended to the east end of the passage through the Second Pylon -- and although Ramesses I's name has not been recovered from the original decoration on either wing of this building's east side (erased when they became the west walls of the Great Hypostyle Hall), is it at all fanciful to assume that he would have usurped also at least some of Horemheb's reliefs in that location (if he did not himself carve the original scenes on the back of the pylon)? If this is what happened, Sety I would subsequently have been placed in the position of having to erase material in his father's name to make room for his own program of decoration on the new hall's western walls. Under such circumstances, it is conceivable that the new scenes in the north wing's top register would be an acceptable *quid pro quo*. Admittedly, we are speculating here -- but, given the strong likelihood that Sety I himself was responsible for inserting these scenes of his father into the decoration of the Great Hypostyle Hall, a conspicuous *homage* like this demands a reasonable explanation. Unless Ramesses I conceived and even partially built the hall -- which, in the present state of the evidence, we can neither affirm nor deny -- the explanation outlined above seems to me a credible alternative.

We may conclude by mentioning one further bit of evidence which has not received much attention to date. Literally "around the corner" from the passage through the Second Pylon which Ramesses I decorated, as we have seen, the jambs on either side of the doorway form a natural frame, not only for the architectural unit by which they stand, but the decorated axis of the pylon (starting with the porch at the west end) which by c. 1290 B.C.E. was substantially in the name of Ramesses I. Like virtually everything else in or beside the hall's central aisle, these jambs now bear the names of Ramesses II¹⁶ -- but this, clearly, is a secondary state of affairs. The recutting stands out particularly on the north jamb, where the scenes were left in raised relief and only the royal names inside the cartouches were shaved down and then recut in sunk relief. On the south

¹³ Legrain, *Karnak*, pp. 147-9. An earlier prototype for these ptolemaic scenes had long been suspected (e.g., Bargaet, *Karnak*, p. 59 top; Murnane, *JNES* 34.3 [1975]:181), but with no proof.

¹⁴ For this disaster see Vincent Rondot and Jean-Claude Golvin, "Restaurations antiques à l'entrée de la salle hypostyle ramesside au temple d'Amon-Re à Karnak," *MDAIK* 45 (1989):249-59.

¹⁵ See the preliminary report by Murnane, "Egyptian Monuments and Historical Memory," *KMT* 5.3 (Fall 1994):14-24, 88.

¹⁶ And they are so described in *PM*² II 43 (148) i-j; cf. the drawings of these scenes in Nelson, *Hypostyle Hall* I.1, pls. 1-4 (south) and 131-4 (north).

side, by contrast, the entire contents of these originally raised scenes were recut *en creux*. Legrain, the only scholar who appears to have examined these scenes in any detail, identified their original owner as Ramesses I,¹⁷ but this observation has been virtually ignored: Seele, for example, seems to have assumed that the usurped scenes on the doorjambs (as well as inside the passage) belonged initially to Sety I!¹⁸ In June 1994 members of the Memphis expedition were able to make a close examination of this material from scaffolding, using binnoculars wherever we could not get close enough to observe traces with the naked eye.¹⁹ The results (reproduced in Figs. 1-2: *secondary versions with original traces on left; reconstructed original version on right*) reveal a picture that is somewhat more complicated than either Legrain or Seele imagined. On each side, Ramesses I and his son both appeared, in alternating registers, as follows:

RAMESESSES I

SETY I

RAMESESSES I

SETY I

This sequence could have been rounded out by another reference to Ramesses I in the bottom register, where a "statue station" of this king substitutes for the relief in the lowest register on the south side and a corresponding space was left undecorated at the bottom of the north jamb.²⁰

Before this material is snatched up by proponents of a coregency, it should be noted that it shares a number of anomalies with the sequence of reliefs on the north wing of the west wall. To begin with, one of the original figures of Ramesses I has the epithet *m3^c-hrw hr ntr C3* following his cartouches.²¹ Second, the scenes on both sides lie beneath a frieze of royal names (cartouches, flanked by cobras, with alternating praenomen and nomen) which was also usurped by Ramesses II but belonged originally to Sety I.²² Since this is virtually a doublet of the situation we have observed with the scenes naming Ramesses I elsewhere on the west wall, there is a strong temptation to assign it as well to the sole reign of Sety I. Perhaps the small "stations" placed at each side of the doorway under Ramesses I were sufficient to complete the decor at the east end of the passage in his time, leaving Sety I to carve the doorjambs as part of the new hall after his

¹⁷ Legrain, *Karnak*, p. 152.

¹⁸ Seele, *Coregency*, pp. 50-60 (§§ 79-87, with Fig. 17).

¹⁹ Along with the author, the team which made this examination consisted of two graduate students, Peter Brand (University of Toronto) and Jennifer Palmer (University of Memphis). We are grateful to Peter Dorman, Field Director of the Epigraphic Survey of the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, for the loan of his expedition's aluminum scaffolding. Observations were taken at midday, when the sunlight raking across the wall brought out the traces of the erased original signs most clearly.

²⁰ *PM*² II 43 (149) with references (south); cf. Legrain, *Karnak*, pp. 149-152.

²¹ Nelson, *Hypostyle Hall*, pl. 133 (=third scene down on the north jamb); the this text is still in its original raised relief. Nelson's copy also shows, however, an original *m3^ct* goddess (between the *wsr* and *m3^ct* of Ramesses II's secondary praenomen) which we did not see: we are confident of our reading of the original signs as *[Mn]-phty-r^c* and *R^c-fms-sjw* (see Fig. 1).

²² See Nelson, *Hypostyle Hall*, pls. 41 left (south frieze, where the original traces are well captured; cf. Murnane, *JNES* 34.3 [1975]:185, Fig. 20) and 262 (where the outlines of the frieze are only drawn schematically).

father's death.²³ Of course, it is also possible (if barely) that this project began while Ramesses I still lived, as his son's senior partner. Like so much else which involves reading history into the maddeningly cryptic carvings on Egyptian monuments, we can only lean now toward the most sensibly conservative option.

²³ Unfortunately, the original raised relief on the doorjambs does not guarantee that they were thus carved only after the Great Hypostyle Hall had been built, to be part of its interior (following the "raised inside, sunk outside" model for which Seele argued so effectively). It now appears that at least some doorways in this period are exceptions to this general rule: for example, the south exterior portal of the hall, copied during the Memphis expedition's 1995 season, was originally executed in raised relief (and also jointly in the names of Ramesses II and Sety I).

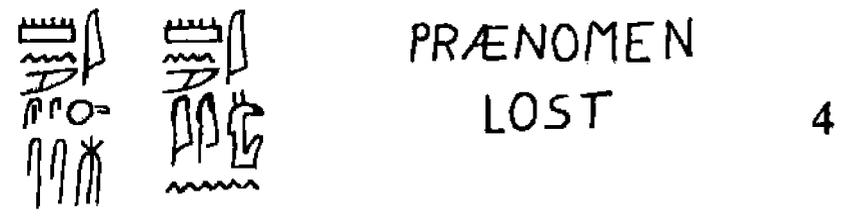
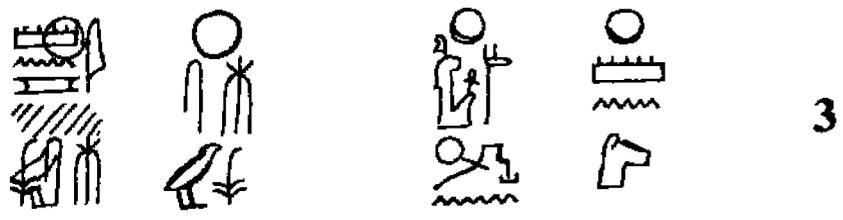
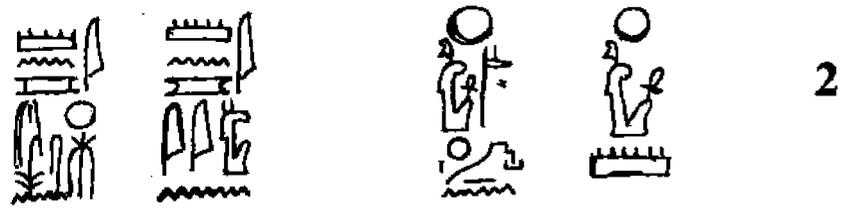
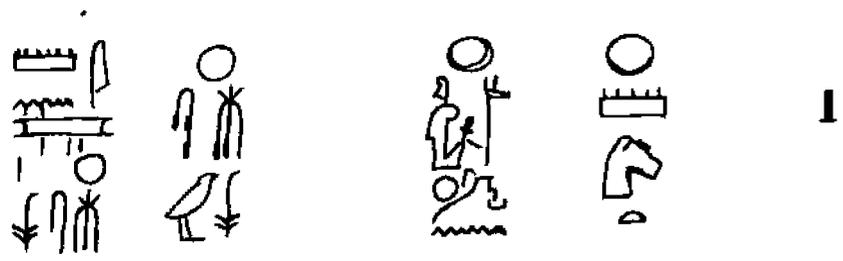


Fig. 1. North

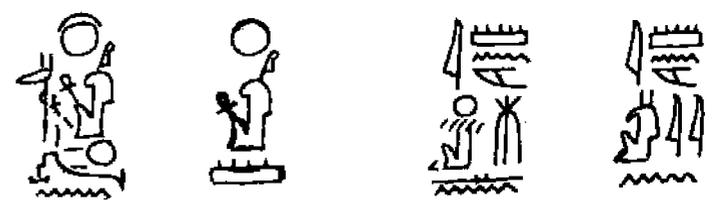
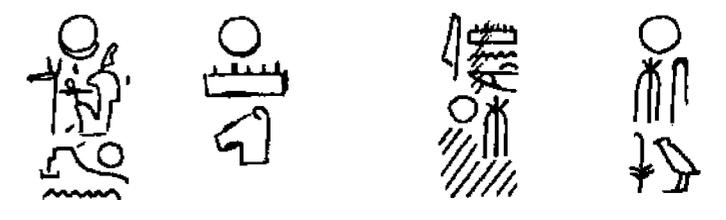
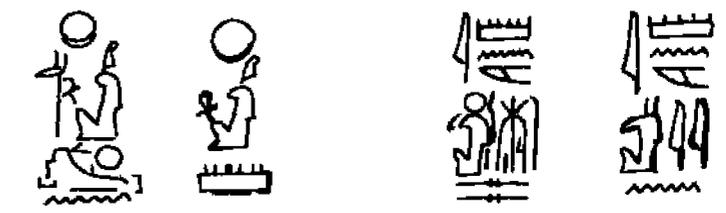
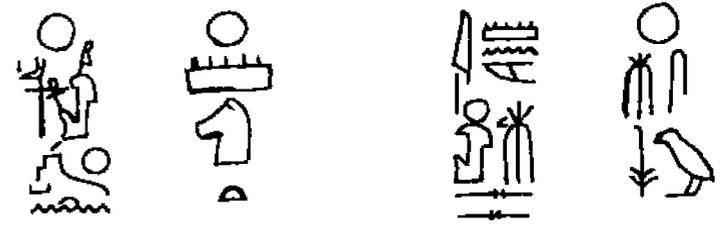


Fig. 2. South