
SHENHUR, TEMPLE OF

معبد شنهور

Marleen De Meyer and Martina Minas-Nerpel

EDITORS

WILLEKE WENDRICH

Editor-in-Chief

Area Editor Geography

University of California, Los Angeles

JACCO DIELEMAN

Editor

University of California, Los Angeles

ELIZABETH FROOD

Editor

University of Oxford

JOHN BAINES

Senior Editorial Consultant

University of Oxford

Short Citation:

De Meyer and Minas-Nerpel, 2012, Shenhur, Temple of. *UEE*.

Full Citation:

De Meyer, Marleen, and Martina Minas-Nerpel, 2012, Shenhur, Temple of. In Willeke Wendrich (ed.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles.

<http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz002dj955>

8542 Version 1, November 2012

<http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz002dj955>

SHENHUR, TEMPLE OF


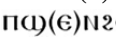
معبد شنهور

Marleen De Meyer and Martina Minas-Nerpel

Tempel von Schenhur
Temple de Chenhour

The Roman Period temple of Isis at Shenbur was built and decorated during the reign of Augustus (30 BCE – 14 CE) through that of Trajan (98 – 117 CE). The site of Shenbur is located between two major cult centers, Koptos and Thebes, in Upper Egypt. While both theological systems were influential at Shenbur, the temple was mainly influenced by that of Koptos; the structure's decoration thus constituted an important part of the regional cult topography. Excavations in and around the temple have revealed that a colonnade was added to its exterior during the reign of Tiberius or later, and that the structure was used as a habitation during the fifth to seventh centuries CE.

شيد وزخرف المعبد الروماني للإلهة إيزيس بشنهور خلال عصر الإمبراطور أغسطس (٣٠ ق.م. – ١٤م) حتي عصر الإمبراطور تراجان (٩٨م--١١٧م). ويقع موقع شنهور الأثري ما بين أثنتين من مراكز العبادة الرئيسية هما فقط وطيبة بمصر العليا. حيث أن النظام العقائدي لكليهما كانا له تأثير على العبادة بشنهور، المعبد كان متأثراً بشكل كبير بمعبد فقط، وبالتالي شكلت زخارف المعبد جزء هام من طوبوغرافية العبادة المحلية. لقد أسفرت الحفائر داخل المعبد وخارجه عن اكتشاف صف أعمدة أضيف للجزء الخارجي من المعبد خلال عصر تيبريوس أو بعده، كما أشارت الحفائر إلى استخدام المعبد للسكن ما بين القرن الخامس والسابع الميلادي.

The Roman Period temple of Shenbur, dedicated to the Great Goddess Isis, is located 20 km north of Luxor, on the east bank of the Nile. The modern Arabic place name (*Shenbur*) derives from the ancient Egyptian name of the site,  *Pꜣ š (n) Hr*, “the Lake of Horus,” Coptic  (Quaegebeur and Traunecker 1994: 168 - 171; Quaegebeur 1997: 159 - 160).

Architecture and Decoration

The dimensions of the temple are 29 × 44 m. Its construction and decoration took place in several stages (Quaegebeur and Traunecker 1994: 191 - 204; Quaegebeur 1995; Willems

2007: 278 - 282). Although all surviving decoration dates to the Roman Period, there are some indications that an older, pre-Roman structure may have existed at the site (Willems et al. 2003: 15, note 8).

The northern part of the temple (rooms I–XIII) is the oldest and is referred to as the “Augustan temple” (figs. 1, 2, and 3). The sanctuary (room I, fig. 4), its façade, and the central gates leading to rooms II and IX were decorated in Augustus’s reign (30 BCE – 14 CE), as was the cult relief on the rear wall of the temple. This relief is located on the temple’s north-south axis line, below the aperture of the false door, where the Great Goddess Isis manifested herself to the people

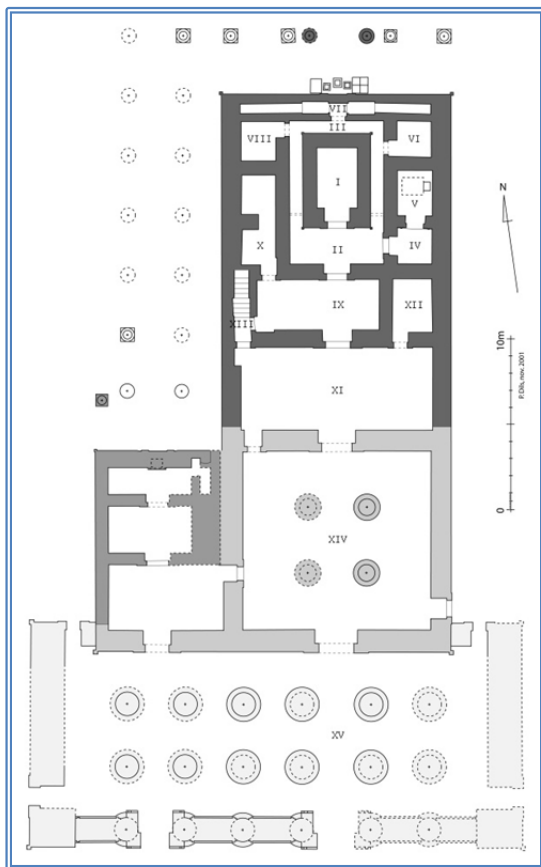


Figure 1. Ground plan of the temple of Shenhur.

gathered in the contra temple. Contra temples are attested throughout Egypt and provided a place for those not allowed into the sanctuary to interact with the deity. Since the sanctuary and the cult relief were the two most sacred loci of worship in the temple, it is not surprising that they were decorated first, along with the entrance-way leading to the sanctuary. The interior walls of the *wabet* (purification room; room V) were decorated

only during the reign of Caligula (37 – 41 CE), while the adjoining New Year’s court remained undecorated (fig. 5; Traunecker 1995; Coppens 1999; 2007). The astronomical ceiling of the *wabet* has received the attention of the scholarly world since it preserves part of a zodiac (Neugebauer and Parker 1964: 77 and pl. 40a; supplementary fragments in Willems et al. 2003: pls. 112 - 113). The other interior rooms of the Augustan temple were never inscribed.



Figure 2. The temple of Shenhur, view to the North, with a high ground-water table.



Figure 3. The temple of Shenhur, view to the North.

This small temple also harbors a number of crypts: one spans the entire width of the rear wall behind the sanctuary (room VII); another is located beneath the pavement of the *wabet*. The northern exterior wall received texts and reliefs on both sides of the false door during the reign of Tiberius (14 – 37 CE), and the eastern and western exterior walls were decorated under Claudius (41 – 54 CE; fig. 6).

During the reign of Tiberius, a small lateral chapel, which seems to have been dedicated to the cult of the child-god Horudja, the son of the Great Goddess Isis (see fig. 1), was built southwest of the Augustan temple. This chapel could possibly have served as a “mammisi,” although its full meaning remains uncertain (Willems et al. 2003: 5, note 1). Due to heavy limestone quarrying, only the lower courses of decoration have been preserved, which explains its late discovery in 1992.



Figure 4. The sanctuary of the temple of Shenhur.



Figure 5. The *wabet* (rear) and New Year's court (front) in the temple of Shenhur.

The originally free-standing lateral chapel was connected to the Augustan temple probably during the reign of Nero (54 – 68 CE), when a hypostyle hall with four columns was built between the two structures. Here, too, only the lower courses of decoration are preserved, although rising ground water and salt crystals have caused much of the relief to disappear through exfoliation of the stone.



Figure 6. Relief depicting Claudius on the second register of the eastern exterior wall.

The final stage in the building process occurred during the reign of Trajan (98 – 117 CE), who added a wide *pronaos* (13 × 29 m) fronting both the hypostyle hall and the lateral chapel. While part of this *pronaos* is still buried under a mound of sand supporting a railroad track employed for the transport of sugar cane, its northeastern corner was uncovered in 1997 (Traunecker and Willems 1998: 123 - 124). Excavation showed that there was no second lateral chapel parallel to that of Horudja (as suggested on the old plan published in Quaegebeur 1997: 162), and that

the pronaos had eighteen columns, of which six are linked by intercolumnar screen walls to form the façade of the building.

The temple of Shenhur faces south, in contrast to the usual east–west orientation of most Egyptian temples that places them perpendicular to the Nile. However, the Nile does not strictly flow from south to north in this region, but rather from east to west; thus the temple is still oriented largely perpendicular to the Nile.

The Augustan temple, built with inferior limestone containing fossil inclusions, forms the largest part of the still-standing architecture (see fig. 3; Quaegebeur 1997: 163). The fossil inclusions in the stone, however, have led to an uneven pattern in weathering, rendering a large portion of the inscriptions illegible. Moreover, lime-burning activities destroyed most of the hypostyle hall, pronaos, and lateral chapel, built of better quality limestone. In combination with the rising ground water and exfoliation of the surface of the lower courses of the walls, the temple’s general state of preservation is deplorable.

Theology

Shenhur is located between the major cult centers of Koptos and Thebes. The temple was influenced by the theological systems of these two centers, as is evident, for example, in the decoration of its walls, which prominently display the triads of both Thebes (Amun, Mut, and Khons) and Koptos (Min, Isis, and Harpocrates) (Quaegebeur and Traunecker 1994: 204 - 207; Willems et al. 2003: 14 - 48; Willems 2007). Most influential, however, was the theological system of Koptos (Willems 2007). Koptite deities such as Min, Isis, Geb, and Horudja are frequently represented, and Theban deities such as Mut bear epithets that are characteristic of the Koptite region, such as “The Great Goddess.” The oldest decoration at Shenhur shows that the temple was dedicated to the goddess Isis, who represents herself in four facets as “Isis the Great, Mother of the Gods,” “The Great Goddess Isis,” Mut, and

Nephthys Nebet-Ihy, thus forming a type of *Isis Quadrifrons* (Willems 2007).

The Great Goddess Isis is also the primary deity of the contemporaneous temple at el-Qal’a, a small (16 × 26 m), rather well-preserved, and richly decorated structure 600 m north of the *temenos* of Min and Isis at Koptos, at the border of the local religious territory (Pantalacci and Traunecker 1990, 1998). Interestingly, the Great Goddess and Horudja are first attested in Shenhur under the rule of Tiberius, whereas in el-Qal’a they only appear during the reign of Claudius (Willems et al. 2003: 22). The temple of Shenhur is thus fundamentally important for the understanding of the cultic topography of the Koptite-Theban region.

Although Thebes had been a dominant religious center in earlier times, during the Roman Period construction and decoration in the Theban area were confined to smaller temples such as that of Isis at Deir el-Shelwit at the south end of the religious territory of the Theban West Bank, and to relatively modest additions to already existing temples. The Koptite region, on the other hand, enjoyed particular interest in the Roman Period. The quarries of the Eastern Desert were heavily exploited under Roman rule and were supported by a major road system, with Koptos being the principal emporium for the caravan routes to the Red Sea ports, including the route through the Wadi Hammamat. This interest in the Koptite region is reflected in the numerous Roman additions and decorations to already existing temples in that area, as well as the building of new structures. The temple of Shenhur is an example of the latter, and a detailed study by Willems underscores how the Koptite theology dominates the Theban one in this temple (Willems et al. 2003: 14 - 48; Willems 2007).

History of Research

The earliest preserved notes on the temple of Shenhur come from Nestor l’Hôte, who visited the site in 1839 and made drawings of several scenes with their inscriptions (Vandier d’Abbadie 1963). These notes still prove their

value today, as a number of these scenes have now disappeared (Willems et al. 2003: 3). Other prominent nineteenth- and twentieth-century visitors to the temple include Karl Richard Lepsius, Charles Edwin Wilbour, Arthur Weigall, and Siegfried Schott (discussed in detail in Quaegebeur and Traunecker 1994: 171 - 175; Quaegebeur 1997: 160 - 161).

Detailed scientific interest in Shenhur only began in 1989, when Jan Quaegebeur (KU Leuven) and Claude Traunecker (Charles de Gaulle University, Lille) joined forces to undertake an archaeological and epigraphic project at the site. Together they led two missions to Shenhur, during which the epigraphy of the interior rooms and the excavation of both the temple interior and the lateral chapel were the main focus. After the untimely death of Jan Quaegebeur in 1995, a third mission was led by Claude Traunecker. In 1996 the project was taken over by Harco Willems (KU Leuven), and seven more seasons followed until 2001, in which the epigraphy of the exterior walls and the excavation of the temple exterior were the central objectives. In 2010, work was resumed in a final mission led by Martina Minas-Nerpel (Swansea University) and Harco Willems.

Archaeology

The excavation of the temple interior was mainly undertaken in the early archaeological seasons (1992, 1993, 1996, and 1997) and provided little evidence of the cultic use of the temple during the Roman Period (Quaegebeur and Traunecker 1994: 177 - 191; Traunecker and Willems 1998). Rather, the debris harbored the remains of the habitation that took place in the temple from the fifth to the early seventh centuries CE, and later, during the Islamic Period. This domestic use of the temple must have followed after its cultic use ceased—that is, when Christianity became the dominant religion in Egypt. Traces of a major fire and evidence of the deliberate destruction of cultic equipment throughout the temple suggest that the process was not a peaceful one and that the Pharaonic cult was struck

down hard by Christianity (Coppens and Willems 1999: 117 - 118). The most striking example of this destruction is the fragmentarily preserved head of a limestone statue of a goddess or queen (Coppens and Willems 1999: fig. 52).

The debris against the western and northern exterior walls of the temple was excavated from 1999 to 2001 (fig. 7). Here, too, remains of small domestic structures that had been built up against the temple were found. These consisted of mud-brick walls and floors, in some cases with associated granaries and an oven in mud-brick. Pottery associated with these structures indicates a date in the fifth to sixth centuries CE. Against the rear wall of the temple a well-preserved red-brick floor was uncovered, underneath which a row of column bases was discovered in situ (fig. 8).

The column bases indicate that originally a small roofed portico existed in the center of the rear wall, supported by two columns, and covering the central cult relief that was created during the reign of Augustus (see figs. 1, 8, and 9). The holes to support the roof beams of this construction in the north wall of the temple do not cut through relief decoration, indicating that these beams were planned from the start. However, at a later date the portico was replaced by a larger roofed area that spans the entire width of the rear wall. Four column bases line up with four large holes in the north wall to support the roof beams of this construction. These holes cut through the existing decoration applied by Tiberius, indicating that the enlargement of the roofed portico took place after his reign, or at least after the rear wall had been decorated. The roofed portico at the rear of the temple formed a contra temple, a place of popular worship, since people who did not belong to the clergy did not have access to the temple proper. This location certainly is the closest one could get to the central sanctuary without entering the temple.

Based on two column bases that were found in situ beneath the domestic structures to the west of the temple, a double row of columns is reconstructed on the ground plan (see fig.

1). A similar colonnade can be suspected to the east of the Augustan temple, but since no excavation has taken place there, no physical trace of it has so far been located (Willems et al. 2003: 7; Willems 2007: 281).

In addition to the colonnades, the most important remains of the original cult installation on the exterior of the temple were found directly in front of the cult relief in the



Figure 7. Excavation trenches to the north and west of the temple.



Figure 8. Row of column bases at the back of the temple of Shenhur.

center of the north wall. Here a number of libation basins were still in situ, flanked on each side by a limestone base of which the function is unclear (see fig. 9). One of the basins is sculpted in the shape of a miniature sacred lake with staircases leading down into the basin.

The excavation in front of the western exterior wall also exposed the lower course of relief decoration of the Augustan temple. Since this lower course had been protected by sand over the ages, it is remarkably well preserved. These scenes show the quality that the relief throughout the temple must have had before erosion took its toll. An example is shown in Figure 10, which displays Claudius sacrificing an oryx before Tutu and Neith (see also Kaper 1998).

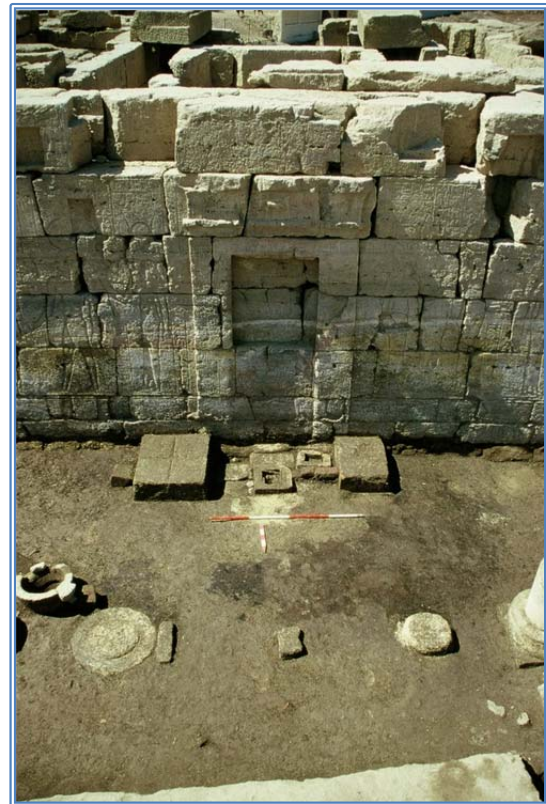


Figure 9. Libation basins in front of the cult relief on the northern exterior wall.



Figure 10. Scene on the lower register of the western exterior wall, showing Claudius sacrificing an oryx before Tutu and Neith.

Bibliographic Notes

The final publication of the temple of Shenhur was planned in three volumes: two epigraphic volumes and one archaeological one. So far only the first epigraphic volume has appeared, disclosing the inscriptions inside the sanctuary and the *wabet*, and on several entrance gates (Willems et al. 2003). The field recording for the second volume was nearly completed in 2001, and thanks to a new cooperation with Swansea University, this volume is now under preparation (Minas-Nerpel et al.: fc.). It will contain the inscriptions on the exterior walls of the Augustan temple, on the interior of the hypostyle hall, and on the lateral chapel. The *Cahier de recherches de l'Institut de papyrologie et d'égyptologie de Lille* (CRIPEL) contains the early excavation reports (Quaegebeur and Traunecker 1994; Traunecker and Willems 1998) and the *wabet* of Shenhur has received a number of separate studies (Traunecker 1995; Coppens 1999).

References

- Coppens, Filip
 1999 The wabet and New Year's court of the Temple of Shenhur. *Göttinger Miszellen: Beiträge zur ägyptologischen Diskussion* 171, pp. 87 - 92.
 2007 *The Wabet: Tradition and innovation in temples of the Ptolemaic and Roman Period*. Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology.
- Coppens, Filip, and Harco Willems
 1999 Chenhour et la région coptite. In *Les Empereurs du Nil*, ed. Harco Willems and Willy Clarysse, pp. 113 - 118. Leuven: Peeters.
- Kaper, Olaf Ernst
 1998 The god Tutu in Behbeit el-Hagar and in Shenhur. In *Egyptian religion: The last thousand years: Studies dedicated to the memory of Jan Quaegebeur*, Vol. 1, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 84, ed. Willy Clarysse, Antoon Schoors, and Harco Willems, pp. 139 - 157. Leuven: Peeters.
- Neugebauer, Otto, and Richard Anthony Parker
 1969 *Egyptian astronomical texts III: Decans, planets, constellations and zodiacs*. Brown Egyptological Studies 6. Providence: Brown University Press.
- Minas-Nerpel, Martina, Harco Willems, Marleen De Meyer, Peter Dils, René Preys, and Troy Sagrillo
 fc. *The Temple of Shanhûr, Volume II: The hypostyle hall, the lateral chapel, and the exterior of the Augustan temple*. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta*. Leuven: Peeters.
- Pantalacci, Laure, and Claude Traunecker
 1990 *Le temple d'El-Qal'a I*. Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire.
 1998 *Le temple d'El-Qal'a II*. Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire.
- Quaegebeur, Jan, and Claude Traunecker, with the collaboration of Christian Casseyas, Maryvonne Chartier-Raymond, Guido Creemers, Peter Dils, and Ilse Roovers
 1994 Chenhour 1839–1993: État de la question et rapport des travaux de 1992 et de 1993. *Cahier de recherches de l'Institut de papyrologie et d'égyptologie de Lille* 16, pp. 167 - 209.
- Quaegebeur, Jan
 1995 Le temple romain de Chenhour : Remarques sur l'histoire de sa construction et sur sa décoration. In *3. Ägyptologische Tempeltagung (Hamburg, 1. – 5. Juni 1994): Systeme und Programme der ägyptischen Tempeldekoration, Ägypten und Altes Testament: Studien zu Geschichte, Kultur und Religion Ägyptens und des Alten Testaments* 33/1, ed. Dieter Kurth, pp. 199 - 226. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
 1997 Excavating the forgotten temple of Shenhur (Upper Egypt). In *The temple in ancient Egypt: New discoveries and recent research*, ed. Stephen Quirke, pp. 159 - 167. London: British Museum Press.
- Traunecker, Claude
 1995 Les ouabet des temples d'el-Qal'a et de Chenhour: Décoration, origine et évolution. In *3. Ägyptologische Tempeltagung (Hamburg, 1. – 5. Juni 1994): Systeme und Programme der ägyptischen Tempeldekoration, Ägypten und Altes Testament: Studien zu Geschichte, Kultur und Religion Ägyptens und des Alten Testaments* 33/1, ed. Dieter Kurth, pp. 241 - 282. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Traunecker, Claude, and Harco Willems, with the collaboration of Maryvonne Chartier-Raymond, Filip Coppens, Peter Dils, Brigitte Gratien, Dirk Huyge, Frédéric Muller, and Ilse Roovers
 1998 Chenhour: Rapport des travaux de 1996 et 1997. *Cahier de recherches de l'Institut de papyrologie et d'égyptologie de Lille* 19, pp. 111 - 146.
- Vandier d'Abbadie, Jean
 1963 *Nestor l'Hôte (1804–1842)*. Leiden: Brill.

- Willems, Harco, Filip Coppens, and Marleen De Meyer, with the collaboration of Peter Dils
 2003 *The Temple of Shanhur, Volume 1: The sanctuary, the wabet and the gates of the central hall and the great vestibule (1-98)*. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 124. Leuven: Peeters.
- Willems, Harco
 2007 Die Theologie der Innenräume des Schenhurtempels. In *6. Ägyptologische Tempeltagung (Leiden, 4. – 7. September 2002): Funktion und Gebrauch altägyptischer Tempelräume*, Königtum, Staat und Gesellschaft früher Hochkulturen 3(1), ed. Ben Haring and Andrea Klug, pp. 277 - 290. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Image Credits

- Figure 1. Ground plan of the temple of Shenhur. Drawing by Peter Dils. © Shenhur Project KU Leuven.
- Figure 2. The temple of Shenhur, view to the North, with a high ground-water table. Schott photograph no. 4517 (1920 – 1930). ©Schott-Archiv (Ägyptologie der Universität Trier).
- Figure 3. The temple of Shenhur, view to the North. Photograph by Marleen De Meyer, 1997. © Shenhur Project KU Leuven.
- Figure 4. The sanctuary of the temple of Shenhur. Photograph by Peter Dils, 1993. © Shenhur Project KU Leuven.
- Figure 5. The *wabet* (rear) and New Year's court (front) in the temple of Shenhur. Photograph by Marleen De Meyer, 2000. © Shenhur Project KU Leuven.
- Figure 6. Relief depicting Claudius on the second register of the eastern exterior wall. Photograph by Marleen De Meyer, 2001. © Shenhur Project KU Leuven.
- Figure 7. Excavation trenches to the north and west of the temple. Photograph by Marleen De Meyer, 2001. © Shenhur Project KU Leuven.
- Figure 8. Row of column bases at the back of the temple of Shenhur. Photograph by David Depraetere, 2001. © Shenhur Project KU Leuven.
- Figure 9. Libation basins in front of the cult relief on the northern exterior wall. Photograph by David Depraetere, 2001. © Shenhur Project KU Leuven.
- Figure 10. Scene on the lower register of the western exterior wall, showing Claudius sacrificing an oryx before Tutu and Neith. Photograph by Marleen De Meyer, 2001. © Shenhur Project KU Leuven.