

## Soleb Renaissance: *Reconsidering the Nebmaatre Temple in Nubia*

by William J. Murnane

Mention pharaonic temples in Nubia and the imagination will usually evoke Abu Simbel, or any of the other monuments left by Rameses II in southern Egypt or the Sudan. Here, often on a colossal scale, the king put himself on display to his Nubian subjects — reminding them of the empire to which they belonged, and of his own status as a divine ruler at its head. Yet in this, as in so much else, the mighty Rameses was not completely original.

About a century earlier another “sun king,” Amenhotep III, had already built two Nubian temples that bear a remarkable resemblance in content, if not in style, to Rameses’s better-known pair. At Sedeinga we find Tiye, Amenhotep III’s chief queen, worshiped as a goddess,<sup>1</sup> much as Rameses’s wife, Nefertari, would later be identified with Hathor in the so-called “small temple” at Abu Simbel.<sup>2</sup> Inside the temple which Amenhotep III raised at Soleb,<sup>3</sup> alongside the long-established deities of the Egyptian pantheon, stood the divine king, just as in the “great temple” of Abu Simbel<sup>4</sup> — only at Soleb this was as a distinctive local god, who took Amenhotep III’s prenomen (throne name), calling himself “Nebmaatre, Lord of Nubia.”

The Soleb temple is also notable for containing a detailed series of reliefs which illustrate the king’s *Sed*-Festival, a jubilee of royal renewal: Amenhotep III would celebrate three such feasts (in regnal years 29/30, 33/34 and 37/38)<sup>5</sup> before he died in the thirty-eighth year of his reign<sup>6</sup>; but it is only at Soleb that we have a detailed record of what took place on such occasions, making this a document comparable in importance to the Jubilee scenes of Niuserre (Fifth Dynasty, at Abu Ghurob)<sup>7</sup> and Osorkon II (Twenty-second Dynasty, from Bubastis).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, along with containing a most unusual series of “name rings” — a list of foreign entities that, theoretically, formed the Egyptian empire of the day — the Soleb temple is also involved in the vexing problem of the alleged coregency between Amenhotep III and his son: a

*Opposite, A relief in Luxor Temple of Nebmaatre Amenhotep III running with vases, one of the feats of the Heb-Sed, although in this instance almost certainly carved in anticipation of the future event, unlike the scenes in the king’s temple at Soleb recording the actual festival, which was celebrated in Year 29/30 of the reign.*







Right, A view of the ruins of the temple at Soleb, as drawn in the early 1820s by the French traveler Frédéric Caillaud, who published his account & renderings of the site in 1827.



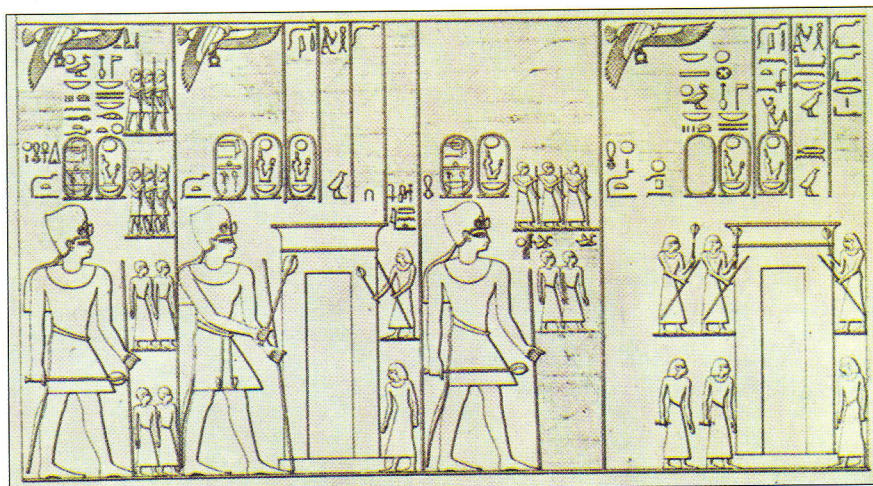
An aerial view of the temple built by Nebmaatre Amenhotep III at Soleb in modern-day Sudan, as it appeared in 1963, following its clearance by the joint Franco-Italian team financed by Mme Michela Schiff-Giorgini.

group of reliefs, near the front of the temple, show the heretic pharaoh, Akhenaten, worshipping “Nebmaatre, Lord of Nubia” — whose appearance here may reflect not only his role as the “resident *djinn*” at Soleb, but his status, as well, as a still-living ruler.<sup>9</sup> In other words, there can be no doubt that, on any number of grounds, the Nebmaatre temple at Soleb is a highly significant monument, not only as a mine of information for specialists, but also possessing unusual attractiveness for interested members of the public.

Unfortunately, the remote location of Soleb (in the northern Sudan, far from the larger local cities) has made it

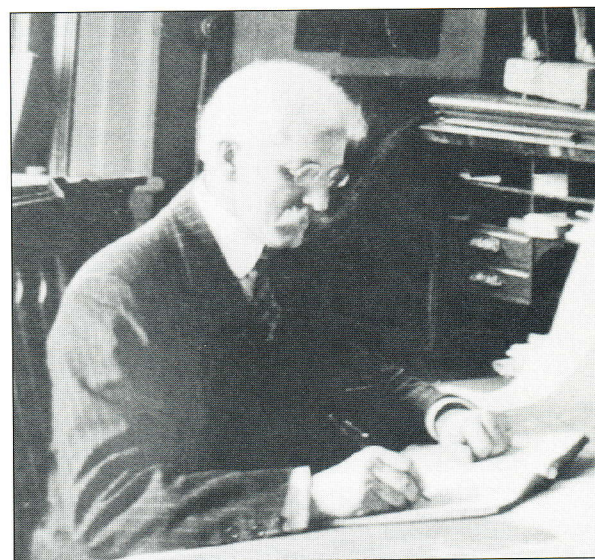


Right, A drawing by Lepsius from his *Denkmäler*, of a relief scene in the Soleb temple depicting Amenhotep III striking the door of the original structure which stood on the site. Interestingly, the small figure to the top right of the door portal is identified as Amenhotep, son of Hapu, who was instrumental in his king's revival of the full rites of the Sed-Festival as they had been performed in earliest times.



virtually inaccessible to most visitors. Even among scholars, only an intrepid few have actually spent any time at the site. Johann Burchardt saw the temple from afar when he passed this way in 1813, but he was unable to cross the Nile and get a close look at it.<sup>10</sup> The French traveler Frédéric Caillaud had better luck in 1821, but the few sketches he made are quite inaccurate in detail.<sup>11</sup> It was left to the Prussian Karl-Richard Lepsius, in the mid-1840s, to provide a better idea of the building's major contents, especially the *Sed*-Festival scenes.<sup>12</sup>

Like most field work in the Nile Valley during the early part of the Nineteenth Century, however, this scholarly foray merely gave researchers a taste of what the site had to offer, and it was not soon followed by a more-detailed program of study. Soleb was left to bake in the Nubian sun. After Lepsius, in fact, the next important professional attention that the temple at Soleb received came only in 1907, from the American Egyptologist James Henry Breasted. Fresh from publishing his pioneering *Ancient Records of Egypt*, and in possession of the first professorship in Egyptology at an American university, Breasted was already obsessed with the deterioration of ancient remains that later would spur the field work of his Oriental Institute. Between 1905 and 1907, he was granted leave by the University of Chicago to record inscriptions in Nubia, then the most neglected province in the Egyptian Nile Valley. He spent ten busy days at Soleb in early 1907, taking notes, sketching important-looking scenes and making a photographic study of the temple. Less happily, his report on the site and the unpublished documentation that supported it<sup>13</sup> would remain the best resources available to scholars for the next fifty years. With epigraphic work lagging even at the most accessible Nubian sites during the first half of the Twentieth Century, Soleb still seemed doomed to oblivion and decay.



American Egyptologist James Henry Breasted, above, spent 10 days in the temple at Soleb in early 1907, taking extensive notes & recording the inscriptions & reliefs in both drawings & photographs.

The site's reversal of fortune came about thanks to the convergence of a few dedicated scholars and a remarkable



Right, "Lady of Soleb" Michela Schiff-Giorgini sits amid the ruins of the temple erected by Amenhotep III to Amen-Re & the king's deified self, Nebmaatre, Lord of Nubia .

Below, Clearance of the interior of the Soleb temple. Clément Robichon (in shirt sleeves, his back to the camera) is third from the left.



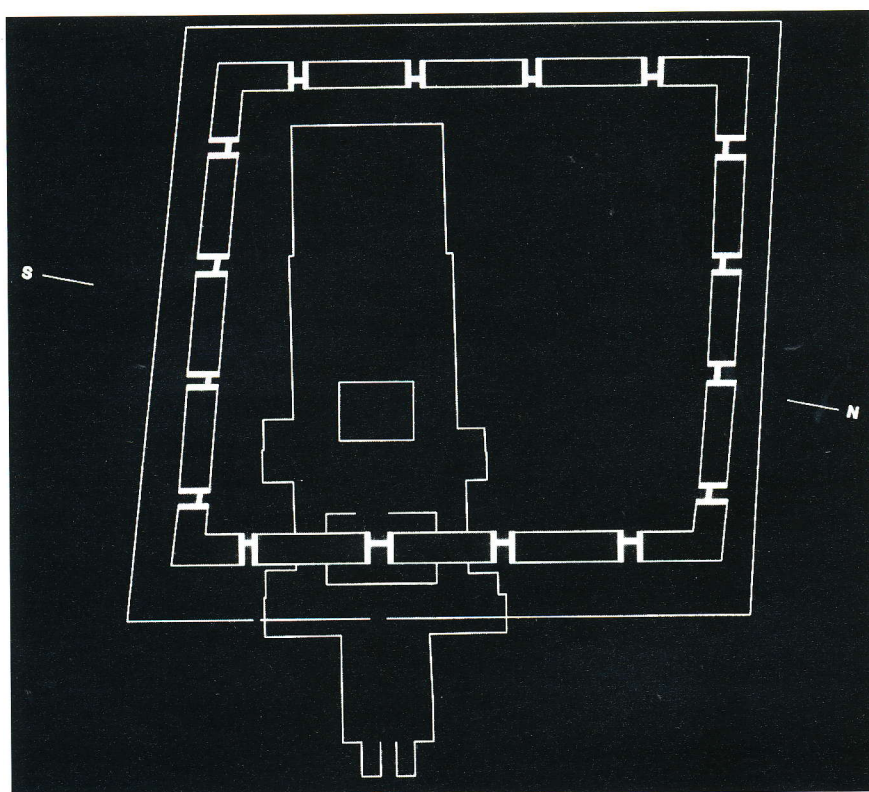
Above, Jean Leclant copying inscriptions on the pylon at Soleb.



woman. To all outward appearances, Michela Schiff-Giorgini might seem to have been an unlikely energizer for a long-term archaeological project. Her charm and beauty as a young woman had briefly made her a film star, under the name Maria Dennis, and her marriage to a wealthy banker subsequently opened up a life of privilege in Paris, allowing her to pursue her interests in art and music. But Michela aspired to more than the dilettante's life she could have led so easily. Her imagination, inspired and disciplined by her early training in Classics, was ultimately attracted to Egypt and its ancient monuments, particularly those of Amenhotep III at Luxor. Her desire to give life to the past was further stimulated by the friendships she formed with noted scholars, such as Jean Leclant (then professor of Egyptology at the Sorbonne) and Clément Robichon, a noted archaeologist and architect with considerable field experience in the Nile Valley.

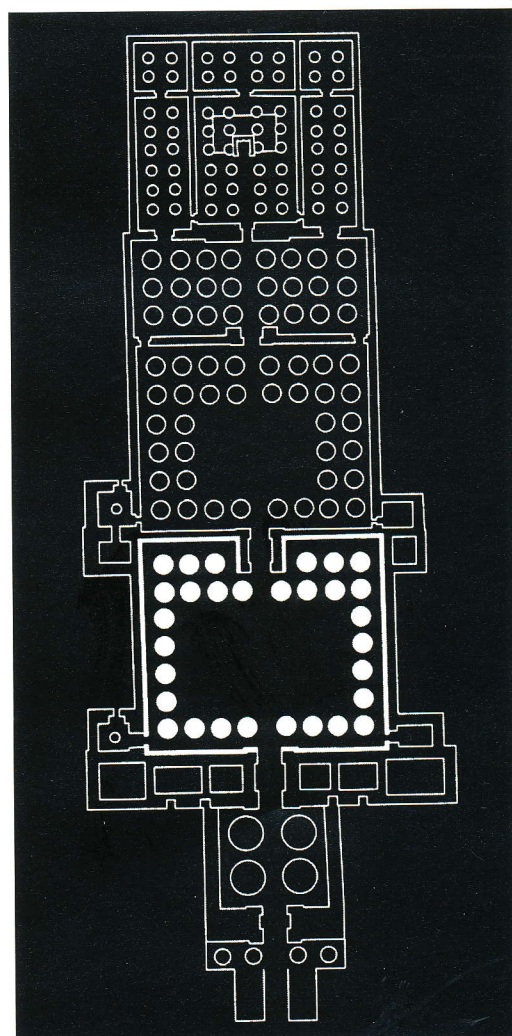
By the mid-1950s, Michela Schiff-Giorgini had decided to devote part of her family's fortune to supporting a continuous field-project in the Nile Valley — and Soleb, arguably the most neglected of Amenhotep III's major monuments, was both a logical choice and available for future work. The project got under way — with the sponsorship of the University of Pisa — in the fall of 1956, when Robichon began to excavate the Amen-Re/Nebmaatre temple and its approaches. Epigraphic recording of the reliefs and inscriptions began during the next season, and this would continue (along with





*Left, Plan of the original structure at Soleb, overlaying the plan of the later temple.*

*Below, Plan of the Soleb Temple, with the first-court columns highlighted.*



archaeological work that would eventually extend to the adjacent cemeteries, and to the neighboring sites of Sedeinga, Sesebi and the Gebel Gorgod) for over twenty years into the future.<sup>14</sup>

Two parts of a projected multi-volume publication appeared during this period<sup>15</sup> — “hard proof” of the seriousness and perseverance with which the Soleb project continued, with Mme. S-G as a constant and inspiring presence at the helm. Her contributions to archaeology would be honored throughout the 1970s by the governments of Italy, France and the Sudan, even as her personal involvement made “the lady of Soleb” well-loved by the villagers and workmen she came to know so well. But then, just as everything now seemed to be moving slowly, but inevitably, toward the project’s ultimate completion, disaster struck. Michela Schiff-Giorgini died suddenly in 1978 and, for reasons that are as rationally incomprehensible as they were intensely personal, the project unraveled almost immediately. Understandably, everyone was affected by the loss, not so much of a sponsor (for the Schiff-Giorgini Foundation still exists to this day, funding Egyptological work), but of the wise and devoted friend who had been the project’s catalyst. Without her, all energy seemed to drain from the enterprise, and some members of the Soleb team sank into a demoralized despond from which they did not emerge. Partly as a result, priceless records of archaeological work done over the preceding decades simply vanished, and by the early 1980s it





*Line rendering of a relief on the pylon at the Soleb temple depicting the resident deity, Nebmaatre, Lord of Nubia — Amenhotep III's incarnation as a living god. Nebmaatre is dressed in a simple belted kilt adorned with a bull tail, & he carries an ankh & a was scepter. On his head is the uraeus-fronted nemes head covering with the addition of ram's horns curling behind the ears and a modius supporting a moon crescent & a solar disk.*

looked yet again as if the temple built by Amenhotep III at Soleb would remain one of the great unknown monuments of Egyptology.

This time, however, the project's apparent death contained the seeds of its resurrection. Professor Leclant, for one, had made it his business to rescue as much as possible of the field notes and tracings from Soleb. Although the press of other work kept him from completing publication of what had been done on the temple-site, the material was kept safe until the next generation was able to pick up the ball. This came, finally, in 1988, when a former student of Leclant's, Nathalie Beaux, was entrusted with the surviving records of the project. She would later be joined by her husband, Nicolas Grimal, who (as director of the French Institute in Cairo) made it one of his priorities to see the Soleb Temple project to completion. Thanks to their joint efforts, the Temple of Amen-Re and Nebmaatre is now on the verge of publication.

*Soleb V*, comprising drawings of the reliefs and inscriptions inside the temple, has already been printed<sup>16</sup> — but, before it is put on the market, the editors have decided to make available, as well, all that is necessary for the proper understanding of these records. This means not only issuing *Soleb III* and *IV* (which contain what survives of the archaeological report, along with descriptions of the reliefs published in *Soleb V*), but also making up the deficiencies of that incomplete and fragmentary record.

Thus, in the fall of 1998, copies of *Soleb V* were sent to a group of scholars, each of them known to have an interest either in Soleb Temple or its builder, Amenhotep III, along with an invitation to meet in Cairo during the following spring to discuss important themes and problems connected with the site. Essays based on the papers read at this international colloquium — which took place on 4-7 April 1999 — were scheduled for publication, as *Soleb VI*, later in that year. The meeting in Cairo was opened by Jean Leclant (Collège de France, Paris), who, along with Edda Bresciani (University of Pisa), recalled Mme. Schiff-Giorgini's life and her contribution to the Soleb project, as noted in the paragraphs above.<sup>17</sup> The following overview of the other papers is supplied as an extended introduction, the better to familiarize readers with the riches inside this temple, acquaint them with some of its problems and give potential users of the forthcoming *Soleb* volumes a better idea of what they can expect from these publications.

Even Egyptologists who have a passing familiarity with Soleb may not know that the present temple represents the second phase of Amenhotep III's building there. A number of blocks from the earlier structure were reused in the



later temple's walls, themselves built around traces of the original foundations. When Charles Van Siclen (American Research Center in Egypt, San Antonio) was asked to discuss this first complex at Soleb, he had to work around the patchy documentation already mentioned, including missing dimensions for some recycled blocks and incomplete excavation records. Even so he was able to reassemble these blocks into a building that, on the basis of its decoration, can be identified as a barque chapel, built to house the boat-shaped shrine within which the god's statue was carried during processions. This structure stood, off-center, inside the enclosure, part of it resting on a raised platform that was preserved when the original structure was transformed into the present temple. Based on these remains, and on hints from the *Sed*-Festival reliefs in that later temple, it may be that the platform was a model of the Jubilee dais: the shrine that first stood on it eventually would have been transformed into the barque chapel, which was later dismantled and rebuilt into the present Temple of Amen-Re and Nebmaatre. Originally, though, the central structure was probably surrounded by the small shrines that housed the divinities who were "guests" at the Jubilee. It is also significant that the scenes of the *Sed*-Festival are preceded by a series of rituals in which Amenhotep III is shown "striking the gates" of an enclosure, perhaps the very structure that was built into the foundations of the later temple.

The tantalizing conclusion that seems to emerge from all this is that the earliest structure at Soleb was a model in stone of the *Sed*-Festival enclosure — similar in intention, if not in design, to Djoser's much earlier "Jubilee Court" inside the Step Pyramid complex at Sakkara. If so, the early buildings at Soleb would have gone up in the "twenties" of Amenhotep's reign and may have lasted until sometime after the end of the first Jubilee (Year 30), before being replaced by the present structure. In turn this would have to mean that the existing temple at Soleb was entirely built and decorated during the last decade of Amenhotep III's life — which, if true, would have interesting implications for both the chronology of the period and its art, as will be seen below.

The Amenhotep III temple at Soleb is badly ruined today, but close inspection shows that it has a lot in common with other buildings from the time of that king. Among these features (discussed by Rainer Stadelmann, former director of the German Institute of Archaeology in Cairo) is the "peristyle" open court surrounded by columned porticoes. While this design is best known from Luxor Temple, it also was found in Amenhotep III's mortuary temple on the west bank at Luxor. The description of this type of building as a "sun



*A raised relief in Luxor Temple showing King Amenhotep III wearing the ram's horn associated with Amen-Re, & also part of the iconography of Nebmaatre, Lord of Nubia, Amenhotep's deified self. Atop the nemes head covering towers an overly large version of the atef crown.*



*Amenhotep III's Grand Colonnade & open court (usually referred to as a "sun court") in the Luxor Temple.*



court" may be a misnomer, however, for structures described as "sun shades" in Egypt have a quite different architecture. Even so, Stadelmann saw an influence of these open courts that was traceable to Iunu (Gr. Heliopolis), the ancient city near Cairo that was sacred from earliest times to the sun god. These exalted affinities did not save Soleb during later periods of native Nubian rule, when many of its statues were removed to Napata (at the "Holy Mountain" that today is called Gebel Barkal) — notably the "Soleb lions" that now grace the British Museum.<sup>18</sup> Alessandro Roccati (Egyptian Museum, Turin, and University of Rome) pointed out, however, that this plundering was a mixed blessing, since Amenhotep III's looted monuments served to influence home-grown art in Nubia during late antiquity. It is also fortunate that such removals were confined to portable pieces, since the looters left behind at Soleb a remarkable record of Egypt's imperial power.

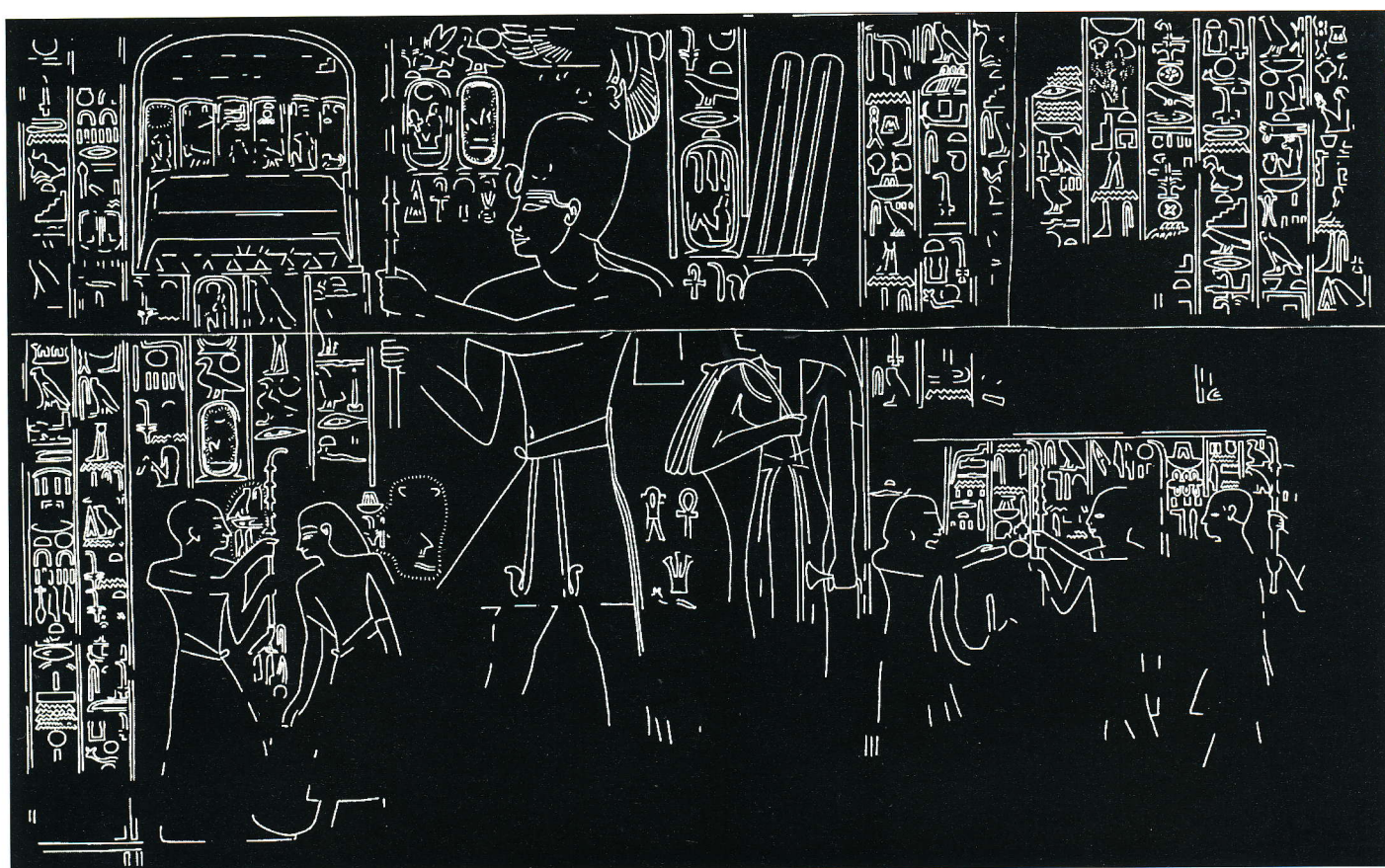


Typical "name rings" in a topographical list from the side of one of Rameses II's black-granite colossi in the first court of the Luxor Temple.

Amateur and professional Egyptologists alike are familiar with "name rings" — oblong ovals with borders carved to resemble fortress walls, their interiors each inscribed with the name of a foreign country, area or people. Quantities of such rings are usually placed on exterior walls or on statues, but at Soleb they are carved onto the lowest drums of the columns in the temple's hypostyle hall. Thus, although the columns themselves are mostly gone, the topographical information near their bases survives fairly well, making it possible for Nicolas Grimal (French Archaeological Institute in Cairo and University of Paris at the Sorbonne) to analyze these "lists of foreign peoples." Far from being a random assortment of names, the rings are organized in distinct "northern" (Asiatic/Mediterranean) and "southern" (African) groups. On each column, moreover, the names are arranged to reflect the "pecking order," diplomatic relationships and geographical sequences of these places. In all, this seemingly conventional material conveys far more than the imperial pretensions of a superpower: rather it presents a conceptual image, in all of its complexity, of the known world under Amenhotep III.

The walls of the temple's open court were covered with scenes that commemorate the first of Amenhotep III's three *Sed*-Festivals. Erik Hornung (University of Basel) concurred that these Jubilees of the third Amenhotep must represent the first full-dress celebrations of the ancient royal-rejuvenation rites to be held in the New Kingdom.<sup>19</sup> Research on the historic antecedents had been carefully done by, among others, the king's "brain-truster," Amenhotep, son of Hapu<sup>20</sup>; and supplies for the celebration already had begun arriving at the royal quarter (today called Malkata) on the





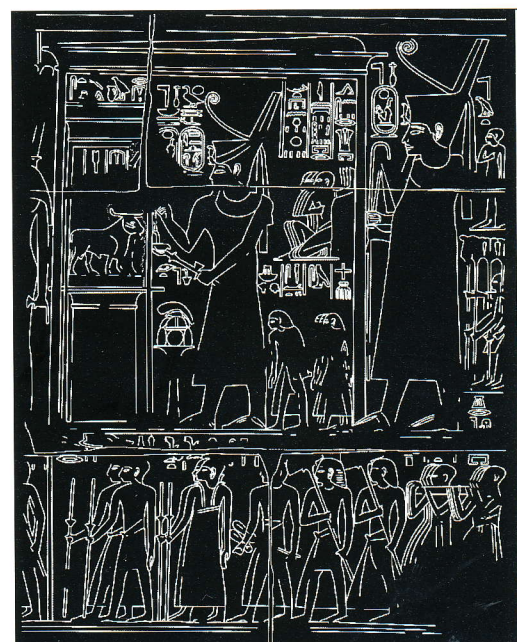
west bank at Waset (Gr. Thebes), well in advance of the Jubilee's projected start near the end of Year 29.<sup>21</sup> The Sed-Festival scenes at Soleb, when finished, would have been a virtually complete account of the ceremonies, from the "illuminating of the thrones" on the eve of the Jubilee, to the processions and divine adorations that formed its core. Several of the specific rituals are dated, and not a few of the participants (the son of Hapu and other officials, as well as assorted princesses) are named in these scenes. This implies to Lawrence Berman (Cleveland Museum of Art) that those events already had taken place by the time the recording of them was carved on the temple walls.

As seen above, the earliest building at Soleb was probably built in anticipation of Amenhotep III's first Sed-Festival. The data in the Jubilee scenes inside the later temple, along with their style,<sup>22</sup> now add to the evidence that these depictions — and almost all the others in this temple — belong to the very last decade of the king's reign. Some might wonder how the royal work force ever managed the tremendous amount of labor, at Soleb and other sites, which this conclusion entails. Recent experiments with dressing stone blocks at Karnak suggest that such a program could indeed be realized in less than a decade — but it is safe to say that this would have been a frantic time for all concerned!

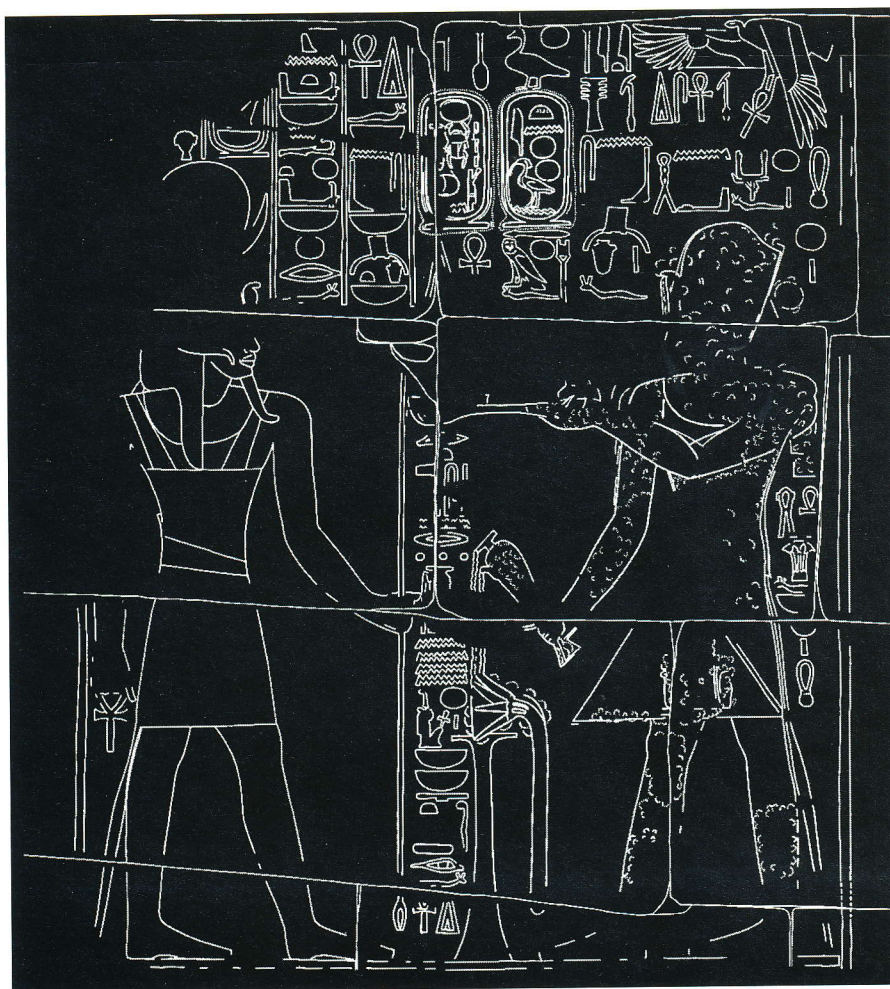
Amenhotep III himself is, of course, the main figure in

*Above, Line rendering of a relief in the portico of the first court at Soleb Temple, depicting the "Illuminating the thrones" rite of Amenhotep III's first Sed-Festival. The king, in the khepresh crown is attended by Great Royal Wife Tiye.*

*Below, A scene from the same portico showing the king making an offering during his first Jubilee.*







*Left, Line rendering of raised-relief scene (opposite) on the north pylon of the temple at Soleb, depicting Akhenaten offering to his father, Amenhotep III, in the latter's guise as the living god Nebmaatre, Lord of Nubia. The figure of the Heretic — rendered in the traditional manner of the reign of Amenhotep III rather than in the new "Amarna style" — was largely erased following the restoration of orthodoxy.*

all the scenes carved inside the Soleb temple. Occasionally, in the *Sed*-Festival events, he is joined by Queen Tiye and some of their daughters, but — as Hourig Sourouzian (German Archaeological Institute in Cairo) pointed out — the king well nigh invariably officiates in the rites. Even so, his attire and the crowns he wears remain fairly standard, with few variations from scene to scene, whereas the queen's iconography is more complex and has a richer historic development. This may be indicative of the multiple religious roles that queens were called upon to assume in rituals, as surrogate divine wives and even mothers of their divine husbands.

At Soleb, moreover, Amenhotep III was more than conventionally divine: not only did he partake of every king's innate godliness, he was himself one of the premier gods of this temple. In two papers devoted to this curious figure — Nebmaatre, Lord of Nubia — Nathalie Beaux and Suzanne Bickel (French Archaeological Institute in Cairo) pointed out that the king's divinization expressed not his own personality, nor what the modern public widely perceives as "pharaonic megalomania," but a broader political and religious strategy. Under Amenhotep III the Eighteenth







Dynasty had moved from a policy of empire building to one of imperial maintenance, acting as a front-rank diplomatic partner among the great powers of the ancient Near East. Within Egypt we also see this king presenting himself to his subjects under new divine identities.<sup>23</sup>

Thus in his temple at Soleb, Nebmaatre, Lord of Nubia is not the living king who has become “god,” but rather a distinct deity, with his own peculiar characteristics. He always appears with a ram’s horn curling around his ear, which suggests an identity with the god Amen (since the king appears in the same guise when he has absorbed the nature of his divine father). Moreover, he invariably wears on his head a disk combined with a crescent. On this basis the divine Nebmaatre at Soleb has been regarded by modern scholars as a moon god, possibly even the distant “lunar eye” in Nubia that complemented the “solar eye” in Egypt, embodied by Amen-Re.<sup>24</sup> Since the moon can be considered the nocturnal aspect of the sun, however, it may be that the disk-and-crescent symbol embraced both solar and lunar natures, making it consistent with Amenhotep III’s definition of himself (at Soleb and elsewhere) as the image of the sun — its “disk,” the Aten — on earth. Described as a “sacred image” inside the Soleb temple, the god, Nebmaatre, also complemented the living king, who was the sun god’s “sacred image on earth.” At Soleb, then, we see not only the royal manipulation of piety in the regime’s interest, but a different aspect of the “solarization” of Egyptian religion, which would reach new heights under Amenhotep III’s successor.

The heretic pharaoh himself puts in a brief appearance inside the Soleb Temple vestibule, a hallway of modest size that replaced the mud-brick ramp which originally led up to the temple’s pylon. The scant remains of this room survive mostly on the front of that pylon’s north wing, where a number of scenes show Amenhotep’s son adoring and being crowned by the gods of the orthodox pantheon, including his two divine fathers, Amen-Re and Nebmaatre, Lord of Nubia. This is odd, for the young king everywhere uses the name he adopted in Year 5 of his reign, Akhenaten, when he turned his back on Waset (Thebes) — and ostensibly the old gods — and founded Akhetaten (El Amarna) as his chief residence. This author (University of Memphis) was able to show, however, that the king had already begun to decorate the vestibule earlier, when he was still Amenhotep IV.

Close inspection reveals that the name “Akhenaten” replaced an earlier erased version, while cartouches with the king’s prenomen (throne name), Neferkheperure-Waenre, are original. Since it is not at all clear that the god Nebmaatre Amenhotep was alive when his son had himself shown ador-

*Detail of the Akhenaten cartouches from the Soleb relief scene on the preceding page. When the king’s cartouches were altered to those of his father following the return to orthodoxy, they were merely covered with plaster and that recut with the glyphs forming Nebmaatre Amenhotep, Ruler of Waset. In time this plaster fell away, revealing the original names of Akhenaten.*



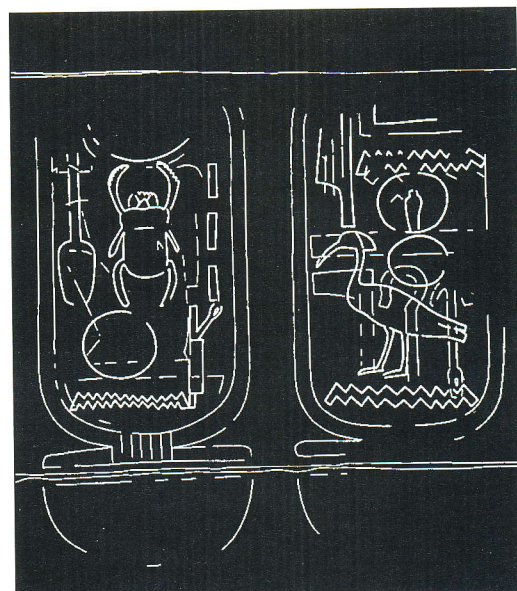


ing him on the vestibule's walls, this material is far from proving a coregency between the third Amenhotep and his successor (whether as "Amenhotep IV" or "Akhenaten").<sup>25</sup>

One further complication, however, is that traces of Amenhotep III's names mingle with those of his son in every case where the signs are clear. Although some earlier interpreters have taken this to indicate that the older king had carved these scenes originally, and this son merely appropriated them,<sup>26</sup> the fact is that Amenhotep III's names in the vestibule are all secondary: they were carved in place of Akhenaten's names following the Amarna period, when the temple was "repossessed" by the agents of orthodoxy. Unfortunately for the restorers, their method was too hasty and superficial to last permanently: instead of erasing Akhenaten's names, then smoothing the stone surface of the wall and re-carving it, they simply applied a layer of plaster and carved the changes in this. So, when the plaster ultimately fell off (as it tended to do after centuries of exposure to the elements), all that remained of "Amenhotep III" were the random marks left in the stone by the chisel wherever it had cut through the plaster, leaving Akhenaten's names virtually in mint condition.

The biggest mystery surrounding the Heretic's presence at Soleb, in fact, is that (even after he became "Akhenaten") he respected most of the old gods' figures, excepting Amen's, in the scenes he had carved as "Amenhotep IV." Erasure of the orthodox gods is often spotty (at both Soleb and Luxor, as well as on the gateways from Amenhotep III's mortuary temple, recently published by Suzanne Bickel).<sup>27</sup> Akhenaten's forbearance in the vestibule may indicate, however, that the old pantheon continued to enjoy a degree of toleration for a while after the king changed his name and moved his court to Akhetaten. Even after the "hard line" that came later, when the orthodox temples were closed and the old gods proscribed, the Heretic may have hesitated to damage those deities at Soleb — not the least his own divine father! — who were shown in active support of his kingship.

Egyptologists are often asked whether we ever find anything really new, especially when we revisit monuments that other scholars have been examining for well over 100 years. Field workers know, of course, how often excavation has run ahead of publication, and how important details can be missed in a superficial "once over lightly" examination of inscribed evidence. Soleb is one site, however, that has not been frequently visited: it is "old" and yet, in many ways, brand new. The long-delayed opening of this site to serious study should be cause for rejoicing by everyone who cares about our science.



*Drawing of another set of Akhenaten's cartouches at Soleb, which were likewise usurped for Amenhotep III by re-cutting the latter king's prenomen & nomen in an over layer of plaster, which fell away in time, exposing the original glyphs cut in stone.*