

The present state of the site of Behbeit el-Hagar

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A recent event urges me to inform the scientific community of the current situation at the site of Behbeit el-Hagar.¹ I returned to the site in early 2002, with the authorisation of the SCA to try and establish a project for the safeguard of the site and the temple. As it is now, it seems that before preparing the reconstruction of the temple, the whole site should be excavated if we want to discover what is left of the important information it could yield.

The site today

The old plans show a huge temenos.² The study of the land-registers since the last war shows the gradual encroachment of agricultural land, first on the eastern side, and then on the western side. This situation has, in some way, been ratified by the building in 1993 of a brick wall, unfortunately erected between the temple and the ancient wall that is now used as a cemetery and so registered in the land-register.

In 2002, the following can be seen:

- At the entrance, on the south, the ancient wall on the left is outside the modern one, in the background (Fig. 1).
- On the eastern side, a rice plantation has replaced wheat fields. The temple behind the modern wall is now completely surrounded by housing (Fig. 2).
- On the western side, housing has developed on archaeological ground (Fig. 3).

More than 50% of the archaeological ground has now been lost.³ The ancient remains, outside the wall, are in danger. Fig. 4 shows the outer face of the northern wall.

The general situation, considering the agricultural soil is fertile and much in demand, is the consequence of the abandonment of the site by Egyptologists at a time when far more space was available to prepare a programme of reconstruction.

¹ As quite a few relief fragments from blocks intact in 1977 have been on auction sale since 1993, I gave files to the SCA which enabled their provenance to be established. This relates to the blocks which have been damaged (the heads have been cut off) since the 1977 photographic survey. See below Figs 7–12. I thank the Supreme Council of Antiquities who granted me the authorization, in January 2002, for returning to the site. I am most grateful to Prof. Dr. Gaballa A. Gaballa, then Principal Secretary of the SCA and Dr. Mohamed Abd-el Maksoud, General Director of the Department for Egyptian Antiquities of the Delta and Sinai, for the help they have thus given me. The SCA has subsequently been successful in retrieving some of the blocks, see, for example, *Al Ahram Weekly* 4–10 July 2002, no. 593, online at <http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2002/593/hr1.htm>. Lastly I thank Nigel Strudwick for assistance in editing this article.

² See, for example, *Description de l'Égypte, Antiquités-Planches*. Tome Cinquième, pl. 30: 'Delta. Environs de Sebennytus, 1 à 9 "Plan topographique et détails d'un temple d'Isis, à Bahbeyt"'. See also references in Lézine, *Kêmi* 10 (1949), 49–57; Favard-Meeks, *Archéologia* 263 (décembre 1990), 26–33; id., *Le temple de Behbeit el-Hagara*; id. in Quirke (ed.), *The Temple in Ancient Egypt*, 102–11.

³ Professor Mekkawy and the University of Tanta have been in charge of the site for some time, from 1988 onwards. We hope that the results of their work will soon be published

Moreover, other dangers have appeared within the modern enclosure. The nearby rice plantations maintain a permanent dampness which favours the development of a luxuriant vegetation (several types of reeds) whose rhizomes damage the archaeological ground. The removal of this vegetation is the first task which needs to be undertaken before starting the work. The vegetation on the North side is shown in Fig. 5, and the salt inside the hypostyle hall appears in Fig. 6.

The study of the site and its goal

The site and its monument are now completely ruined.⁴ The history of the site is not well known. Its Arabic name Behbeit comes from the ancient Egyptian toponym Per-hebite(t): 'The house of the festive goddess' while el-Hagar 'the stones' alludes to the presence of ruins.

It has never been systematically excavated with the exception of the south-eastern corner of the temple itself, where many blocks were uncovered by the Mission Montet at the end of the 1940s and early 1950s. The history which can be established for all the periods before the construction of the temple in the 30th dynasty is only based on texts and the name of the site appears for the first time in the New Kingdom, but only in texts found outside Behbeit. Considering its geographical situation, south of Mansura and north of Samanud, lat. N 31°02', long. E 31°17', it is important for the history of the settlements of the Delta to establish when the site was first inhabited. Because of its geographical location, it has to be established if it were in a swampy region and when cultivation appeared. On a turtleback and away from a Nile branch, it could have been inhabited since prehistoric times.

The present status of the temple

The temple was dedicated to the family of Osiris by the last Egyptian pharaoh, Nectanebo II. Then Ptolemy II and Ptolemy III completed the decoration of the temple. This covers a period from 360 to 221 BC.

It would be possible in theory to reconstruct the granite ruins of the temple. However, a major difficulty with this is that the granite blocks have suffered from exposure to moisture. The treatment applied in the past few years by the SCA has stopped the progression of the damage, but the reliefs now suffer from other irreversible degradations, as shown by the following examples:

- Fig. 7. Block with falcon and bull guardians in 1977
- Fig. 8. The same block in 2002
- Fig. 9. Block with a cow goddess in 1977
- Fig. 10. The same block in 2002
- Fig. 11. Block showing Ptolemy II offering the *Wedjat* eye in 1977
- Fig. 12. The same block in 2002.

In spite of these unfortunate developments, the site and the temple remain extremely important. The temple itself is probably the most beautiful in the Delta and the only one constructed entirely of granite. Some examples:

- Fig. 13. The western entrance in 1990. On the left, lying on the ground, the fallen blocks were decorated by Ptolemy III.

⁴ The site must have been abandoned (there are no signs of a Christian presence) and over the centuries the temple has been used as a quarry, which partly explains its present state.

- **Fig. 14.** In 1977, a general view of the facade of the sanctuary of Isis decorated by Ptolemy II. This photo shows the different levels of destruction of the temple. The left wing could be entirely rebuilt while the right one, so much damaged, can be reconstructed on paper but the blocks on site are so scattered that it is difficult to distinguish them.
- **Fig. 15.** In 1990, the left side of Isis sanctuary facade. A pile of blocks.
- **Fig. 16.** The south wall of the sanctuary of Isis in 1990. Though much damaged, the huge blocks of dark grey granite suggest the same comments as R. Pococke's in 1743: '...it far exceeds anything I ever saw in this way'.
- **Fig. 17.** From the Osirian chapels on the eastern side, in 1977, a block of the chapel of Osiris Res-wedja showing the second register and part of the third register of the axial wall. On the right side, an offering to a double aspect of Osiris; on the left, Hat-Mehyt.

Before a reconstruction can be attempted

The history of the building itself is controversial. It is very important to determine when the main temple was destroyed and to establish how such a building could come to be in such a wrecked condition: for geological reasons, is the building too heavy for the ground? As a result of repeated earth tremors, earthquakes being historically known in antiquity? Its early destruction is also much debated because of the importance of the cult of Isis and Osiris, an Egyptological tradition trying to establish that Behbeit el-Hagar is the oldest cult centre of Isis (beginning in the Old Kingdom) and that it is the Iseion/Iseum of classical writers, even though the temple may have been destroyed as early as the 2nd century BC.

It is most unlikely that this monument was destroyed later than the 1st century AD, since a block bearing the name of Nectanebo II was found in a temple dedicated to Isis and Serapis in Rome; it could have been placed there either at the time of the temple's first foundation in 43 BC or when it was renovated under Domitian (81–96 AD). This surely indicates that its spectacular destruction had taken place by that time.⁵

There are many questions to answer

If the early destruction of the temple is confirmed, it seems certain that the whole temenos was not abandoned.⁶ One conclusion is evident: if the whole site is not excavated soon, its history (both prior to the building of the temple and after its destruction) will be lost for ever. The site, as it is now, is a scientific challenge for many specialists such as geologists, hydrologists, seismologists, topographers, archaeologists and architects. It holds many answers for the scientific world and if we do not wish to lose an important chapter of the history of the Mediterranean civilisation involving Egyptian, Greek and Roman cultures, the site urgently needs the help of many specialists.

⁵ See my comments in *Topoi*, Suppl. 3 (2002), 44.

⁶ For instance, the cult of the Akhet cow is well attested at the end of the 1st century AD. This fact was analysed as demonstrating the permanence of Isis cult. But see my comments in *Topoi*, Suppl. 3 (2002), 44 n. 87.

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Figs 1–7; 9–17 © Christine Favard-Meeks; photo 8 © Maryvonne Chartier-Raymond.



Fig. 1 Area of the entrance to the temple.



Fig. 2 Housing surrounding the temple.



Fig. 3 Housing on archaeological ground to the west of the temple.



Fig. 4 The outer face of the northern wall of the temple.



Fig. 5 Vegetation inside the northern part of the temple enclosure.



Fig. 6 Salt inside the hypostyle hall.



Fig. 7 Block with falcon and bull guardians in 1977.



Fig. 8 Block in Fig. 7 in 2002.



Fig. 9 Block with a cow goddess in 1977.



Fig. 11 Block showing Ptolemy II offering the Wedjat eye in 1977.



Fig. 10 Block in Fig. 9 in 2002.



Fig. 12 Block in Fig. 11 in 2002.



Fig. 13 The western entrance in 1990.



Fig. 14 General view of the facade of the sanctuary of Isis in 1977.



Fig. 15 The left side of the Isis sanctuary facade in 1990.

Fig. 16 The south wall of the sanctuary of Isis in 1990.



Fig. 17 A block of the chapel of Osiris Res-wedja in 1977.