

A newly discovered edifice of Atum in Akhmim

Part of the necropolis of the primeval gods?

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ONLY A FEW RUINS of *'Ipw / Hnty-Mnw*,² the former capital of the 9th upper Egyptian nome in the area of the modern city of Akhmim in Middle Egypt, are still visible today. This is striking because the main temple at least had been in such good condition in medieval times that many accounts described it as a kind of world wonder. Now even the scarce archaeological remains of the ancient town, which were still visible in the 19th century, have vanished almost completely.³ It was not until the 1980s that new important discoveries were made. In the course of an emergency excavation, the foundation walls of a Ramesside gateway and the famous colossal statue of Meritamun were uncovered.⁴ Just recently, in an illegal excavation not far from that find spot, a monument was discovered that sheds new light on the religious landscape of the ancient city [fig. 1].

Discovery circumstances

In mid-February 2015 staff members of the MSA in Akhmim received a hint about an illegal excavation taking place almost in the backyard of their administration building. About 50m southwest of the Taftish at the rising slope of the ancient tell, residents dug a vertical shaft in their house of approx. 5m depth. By mere chance this shaft led them directly in front of a limestone door decorated with hieroglyphic inscriptions and flanked by a burnt mud brick wall [fig. 2]. The looters dug a small horizontal tunnel straight through the doorway and stopped after a few meters. A second tunnel, after passing behind the door, turned right following the brick wall. This tunnel too continued only a few meters, before finally the MSA shut down the illegal dig. After a team of Egyptian conservators had roughly cleaned the door frame of adhesive soil, epigraphic and photographic documentation began at the end of February. The danger of collapse was high in the narrow underground passages and unfortunately it was not possible to set up more than two pillars to support the fragile ceiling of the doorway. Under these circumstances it was considered best to keep time down in the shaft as short as possible.

¹ The authors wish to thank Mohsen Lamay, Abdellah Abu-Gabal, Samir Ahmed Abdellatif, and last but not least Mohamed Abul Yazid. We are indebted to Katherine Davis for correcting our English. For a brief description of the monument see also G.A. NASSER, St. BAUMANN, Chr. LEITZ, *Egyptian Archaeology* 47, 2015, 3-6.

² K.P. KUHLMANN, *Materialien zur Archäologie und Geschichte des Raumes von Akhmim*, SDAIK 11, Mainz, 1983, 9-13.

³ KUHLMANN, *Materialien*, 14; M. GABOLDE, "La fin du temple d'Aḥmīm" (in press).

⁴ KUHLMANN, *Materialien*, 16.

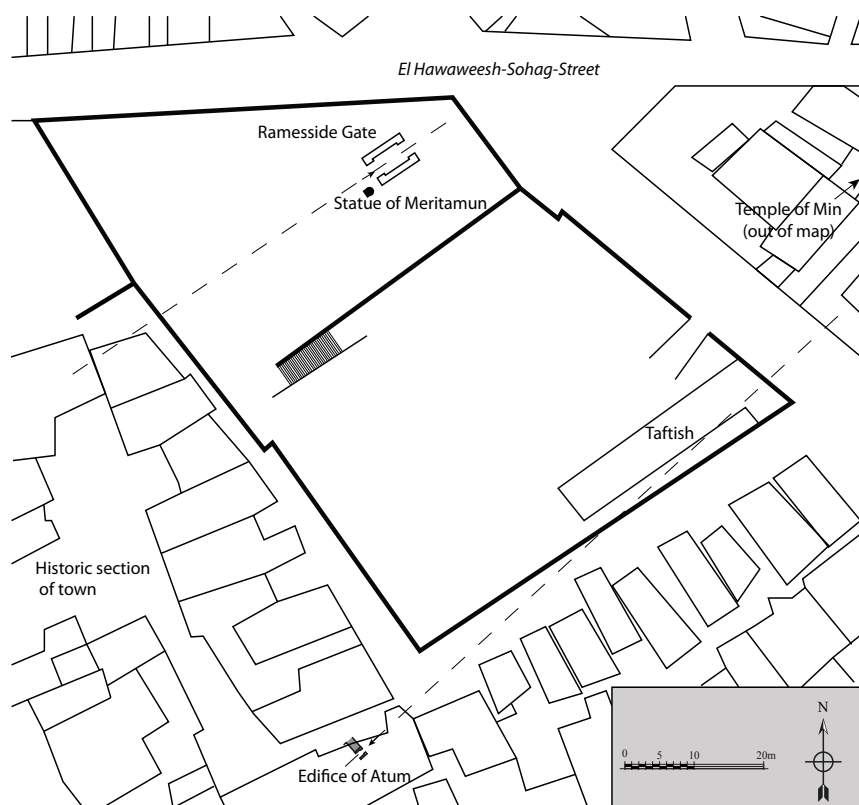


Fig. 1. Monuments of Akhmim.

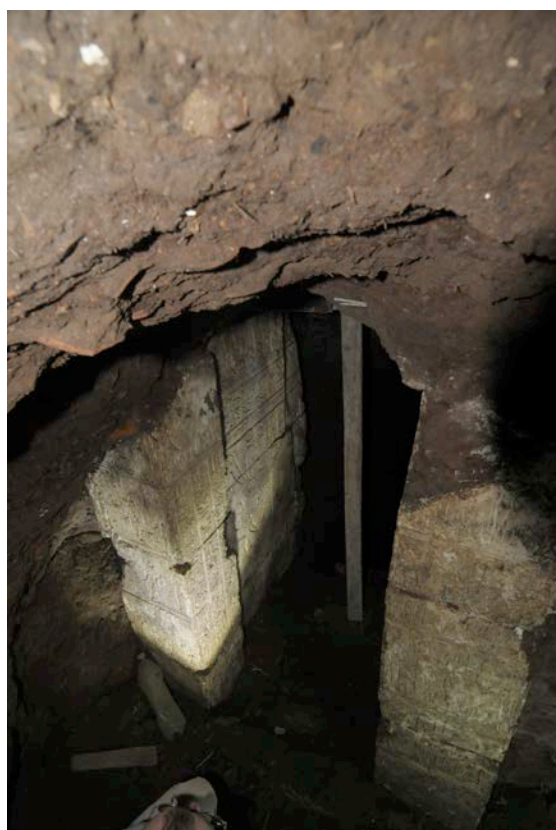


Fig. 2. The shaft leading directly to the doorway.

Description of the building structure

The narrow robbers' tunnels uncovered no more than a small fraction of the building and thus only a little can be said concerning its shape and size. A wall of burnt mud-bricks (width: 120cm) is pierced by a limestone doorway of approx. 188cm in height and 64cm in width. The wall runs in a northwest-southeast direction, therefore adopting the orientation of the nearby great Ramesside gateway. It is interesting to note that there is a connection to Athribis on the other side of the Nile, as the gate of Ptolemy IX in Athribis is on the same axis as the Ramesside gate in Akhmim.⁵

The layout and decoration of the newly discovered doorway show that the entrance was located in the northwest. Assuming it is not a side door, the building was orientated to the southwest, which means it was opposite to the entrance of the Ramesside gateway and to the temple of Min that M. Gabolde locates southeast of the gate [fig. 1].⁶ It is conceivable that the Temple of Min and the new monument are on the same axis.

In all likelihood, the looters discovered the front door of an enclosing wall of a small chapel such as those dedicated to Osiris in Karnak. These structures often consist of a mud-brick enclosing wall forming one or two courts and a small sanctuary built of stone centered in the rear part opposite the entrance.⁷

The doorway leads into a room or open court, of which at least the northwestern limit could be detected. The brick wall ends after 1,80m [fig. 3]. After forming a right angle, from this point on a mud-brick wall runs to the southwest. The robbery tunnel breaks through the lower part of that wall, which is cleared for a length of approx. 70cm. This part shows a thin layer of white plaster [fig. 4].



Fig. 3. Stone floor and end of brick wall.

⁵ EL-SAYED, *Athribis* I, 10.

⁶ M. GABOLDE, "La fin du temple d'Aḥmīm", fig. 4 (in press).

⁷ Cf. L. COULON, C. DEFERNEZ, "La chapelle d'Osiris Ounnefer Neb-Djefaou à Karnak. Rapport préliminaire des fouilles et travaux 2000-2004", *BIFAO* 104, 2004, 137, fig. 7.



Fig. 4. Tunnel leading through mud-brick wall covered with plaster.

Limestone slabs probably covered the floor of the room completely. However, floor slabs are missing in the area behind the door since the treasure hunters dug a pit of about 1,50m in depth below the floor level. Nothing can be said about the construction of the floor in the area in front of the door, because it is not excavated down to the ancient floor level. Moreover, it is unclear if this area lies still inside or already outside the building.

Concerning the condition of the doorway, it has to be noted that parts of the sealing were taken away at an undetermined moment in history. There are also no traces of a lintel, which surely existed on top of it. The lower part however is in better condition. Serious damage occurred only at the southern part of the scene in the doorway (No. 14) and at the right inner door-jamb (No. 18). Fortunately the looters did not uncover the lower part of that jamb. It is fragile to such an extent that removing the soil would lead to loss in parts of the inscription.

The individual scenes⁸

Four registers showing ritual scenes decorate the right and the left door-jambs. Accompanying inscriptions were intended to be added at a later stage but only the boundary lines for these texts were carved. Thus, only iconography can help in identifying the 16 depicted gods. Reference material comes on the one hand from the numerous stelae from Akhmim and on the other hand from reliefs in the temple of Athribis.

⁸ The fact that some scenes were not completely uncovered and some scenes were only roughly cleaned made it impossible to provide drawings showing every detail.



Fig. 5. Scene 1.

1. Inner side, left door-jamb, upper register:

The head of the first male god is destroyed, making it impossible to identify this figure. The goddess has a human head, which at least rules out Repit. Unfortunately her crown is destroyed; otherwise it would have been possible to distinguish between Aperetset and Isis. Both normally wear a Hathor crown⁹, but the crown of Isis often¹⁰ has the throne hieroglyph on top of the sun disc. The king's offering is destroyed.

⁹ E. g. stela CG 22045 (A.B. KAMAL, *Stèles ptolémaïques et romaines*, Le Caire, 1905, pl. XIV); 22114 (pl. XXXIV); 22151 (pl. XLVI). For *Athribis* see for example C 2, 27; E 1, 31; E 3, 8.

¹⁰ Cf. stela Berlin 22489 (SCHARFF, *ZÄS* 62, 1926, 86 and 92). Without the Isis-sign in *Athribis* in E 4, 7; L 3, 81 and M 2, 3.



Fig. 6. Scene 2.


2. Inner side, left door-jamb, second register:

This pair of gods is probably Kolanthes the child and Repit. In Athribis the child god is always depicted with a human head wearing a double crown and a side lock of youth. Only the lock is missing in Akhmim. Behind him Repit is easily identifiable because of the lion head and the sun disc. As in Athribis she holds a papyrus sceptre. The king's offering is hard to identify due to its small size. He seems to hold two small bags $\delta\delta$, indicating that he offers green and black eye paint (*w3d msdmt*).



Fig. 7. Scene 3.

3. Inner side, left door-jamb, third register:

The first god is Thoth. This is clear from the ibis head, the moon disc and the crescent above his head. As for the goddess beside him, unfortunately the upper part of her headdress is destroyed. The long vertical line above her head may be part of the so-called rosette of Seschat¹¹, who does not necessarily have to wear the panther's coat¹². The king presents a bowl with an udjat eye , which is a suitable offering for a moon god.

¹¹ E. g. stela CG 22186 (A.B. Kamal, *Stèles ptolémaïques et romaines*, Le Caire 1905, Tf. LIX) behind Thoth.

¹² See D. BUDDE, *Die Göttin Seschat*, *Kanobos* 2, Leipzig, 2000, 353 and 359 (pl. 12 and 18).



Fig. 8. Scene 4.

4. Inner side, left door-jamb, fourth register:

The depicted god is clearly either Min or Min-Re. Behind him presumably stands Aperetset, recognizable from the Hathor crown. As is typical in an offering for Min, the king holds two lettuce plants in his hands¹³.

¹³ Cf. *Athribis* II, 526.



Fig. 9. Scene 5.

5. Inner side, right door-jamb, upper register:

This scene shows the adoration of Min(-Re), behind whom stands a chapel with a lotus flower¹⁴. Behind the chapel the feet of an unidentifiable goddess are discernible.

¹⁴ Cf. *Athribis* II, 189 and 416 and CG 22209 (A.B. KAMAL, *Stèles ptolémaïques et romaines*, Le Caire, 1905, pl. LXXII).



Fig. 10. Scene 6.

6. Inner side, right door-jamb, second register:

In this scene the situation is quite clear: Osiris with atef crown¹⁵ and Isis with Hathor crown, vulture diadem and the Isis hieroglyph above the sun disc receive a sceptre (*hk3t*) and a flagellum (*nh3h3*) from the king. This offering is characteristic for Osiris¹⁶.


¹⁵ Cf. stela Berlin 22489 (SCHARFF, *ZÄS* 62, 1926, 86 and 89).

¹⁶ See Chr. LEITZ, "Die Außenwand des Sanktuars in Dendara. Untersuchungen zur Dekorationssystematik", *MÄS* 50, Mainz, 2001, 188-190.



Fig. 11. Scene 7.

7. Inner side, right door-jamb, third register:

This pair of gods can be clearly identified. The first one is *Hr-sndm-ib*, identifiable from the falcon head and the double crown¹⁷. The second is Nephthys who wears a Hathor crown with the Nephthys hieroglyph on top of it. However, another option for the first god is to identify him with Haroeris. Both Haroeris and *Hr-sndm-ib* are shown in the same way on stela Berlin 22489 and in Athribis (scene K 1, 22 unpublished). The offering is not easily discernible. Daniela Mendel assumes the king holds a papyrus sceptre with a cobra, such as .

¹⁷ Cf. stela Berlin 22489 (SCHARFF, *ZÄS* 62, 1926, 86 and 89).



Fig. 12. Scene 8.

8. Inner side, right door-jamb, fourth register:

As on the left side, the lowest register is seriously damaged and the king's offering is not visible anymore. The first god is the falcon headed *Hr-sndm-ib* wearing a double crown. Behind him stands a human-headed goddess with Hathor crown, most likely to be identified as Aperetset.



Fig. 13. Scene 9.

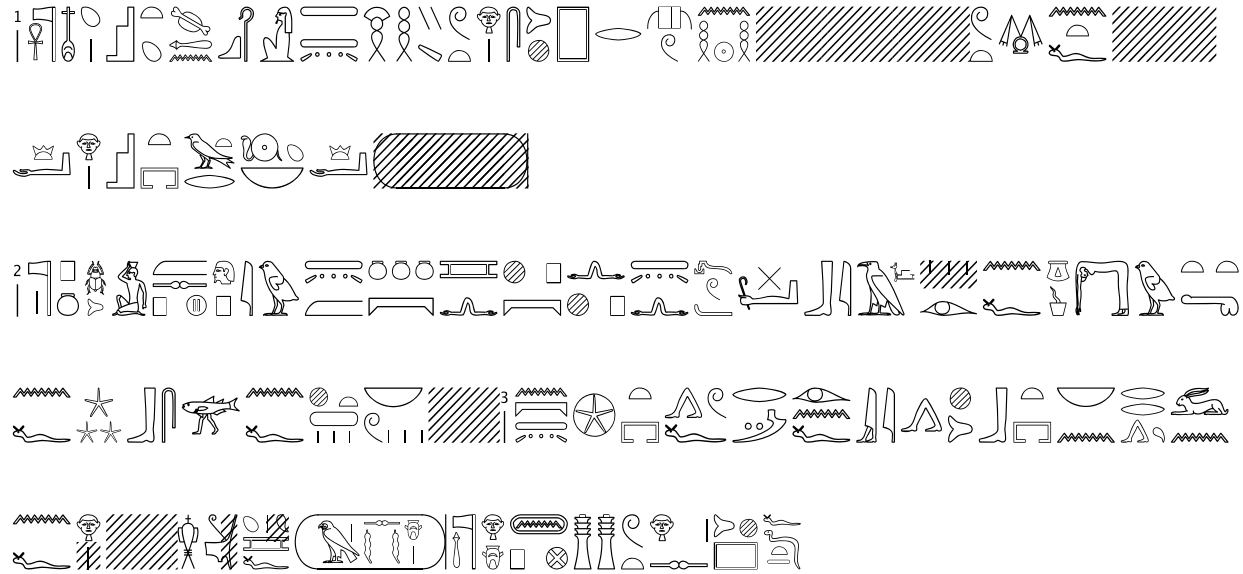
9. Outer side, right door thickness, upper part:

The king presents a tray with offerings to Atum who is depicted as a falcon headed snake wearing a sun disc on top of his head. Lines for an inscription are engraved in front of him but the text is missing. As in scene 14 this may be a *f3t ht* scene.



Fig. 14. Inscription 10 (photomerge).

10. Outer side, right door thickness, lower part:



¹ 'nh ntr nfr s3 3st iw' '3 n
hk3 t3wy w3h.ti hr srh r 3w n
nhh [...]ti dmd.n it[f? ...] h'
hr st wrt s3 R' nb h'w
(empty)

¹ (Long) live the good god, the son of Isis, the great heir of the ruler
of both lands, lasting on the throne for the nhh-time [...] that [his]
father has united [...] who appears on the great throne, the son of
Re, lord of crowns (empty).

² ntr pn hpr.f m sp tpy iw t3 m
nwn n hpr(t) pt n hpr(t) t3 n
nwh(t) bi3 ir.n.f gbt wtt.n.f
ntrw bs.n.f ht nbt [...] ¹⁸ ³ n(t)
pt t3 dw3t iw.f r m33 ir.n.f ii
hr bw nb n (= m) phr.f wnn.f
hr [...] ¹⁹ s3 n s3.f mr.f (Hr-
snđm-ib) ntr '3 hry-ib 'Ipw
dd.ti hr srh.f dt

² This god: He came into being in primeval times when the earth
was still within the Nun²⁰, when the sky had not yet come into
being, when the earth had not yet come into being²¹, when the
firmament had not yet been bent (?)²². He created the sky, he
generated the gods²³, he made appear all [...] products ³ of the sky,
earth and underworld. He comes to see what he has created by
approaching everybody in his run. He offers (?) protection for his
beloved son (Horus-senedjem-ib), the great god who is in
Akhmim²⁴, lasting on his throne forever.

¹⁸ Probably just an adjective (e. g. nfr: "perfect") fills the break.

¹⁹ Add: [irt]? Cf. scene 12, l. 3.

²⁰ Cf. D. KLOTZ, *Adoration of the Ram. Five Hymns to Amun-Re from Hibis Temple*, YES 6, New Haven, 2006, 102 and 106-107 (note also his reference to the pun between the uncertain word tm3/dm3 and Atum).

²¹ Probably a short quote from the pyramid texts, cf. Pyr. 1466b-c: ms Ppy pn in it.f Tm n hprt pt n hprt t3: "This Pepi was created by his father Atum, when the sky had not yet come into existence, when the earth had not yet come into existence". Cf. the so-called Turahymnus (J. ASSMANN, *Re und Amun, Die Krise des polytheistischen Weltbildes im Ägypten der 18.-20. Dynastie*, OBO 51, Freiburg Schweiz, 1983, 226; for the text see BAKIR, *ASAE* 42, 1943, pl. IV after p. 88, l. 11-12): kd.n.f sw n hprt pt t3 iw t3 m nwn r-imy-tw nnyw: "He (= Amun-Re) has created himself, when sky and earth had not yet come into existence, when the earth was still in Nun among the tired ones (Assmann: 'der müden Flut')".

²² Cf. *Wb* II, 223, 16-17 (suggestion of D. Meeks).

²³ As a participle wtt ntrw refers to various gods. Up to now, however there is no evidence that it designates Atum (cf. *LGG* II, 600c-601a).

²⁴ For these epithets of this god cf. *Athribis* II, 4 (C 1, 26, Zl. 7); however, this sequence is also attested for Kolanthes the child and for Osiris in Athribis.



Fig. 15. Scene 11.

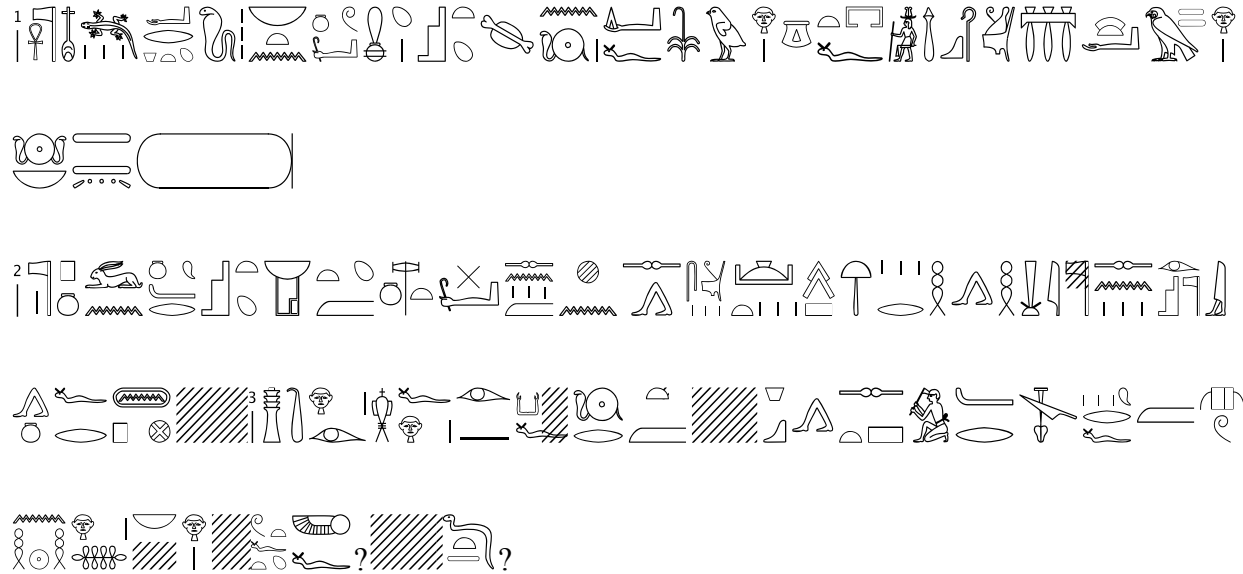
11. Outer side, left door thickness, upper part:

The king raises his hand in adoration in front of a coiled snake. Only the lines for the accompanying inscriptions are engraved.



Fig. 16. Inscripton 12 (photomerge).

12. Outer side, left door thickness, lower part:



¹ *nh ntr nfr š3 i'rw' nb
{l}<k>nw mi s3 3st iw' n R'
di.f sw hr nst.f ity '3 hk3
shmti thn h'w <mi> Hr-3hty
{hr} nsw-bity nb t3wy
(empty)*

¹ (Long) live the good god, the one with numerous cobras, lord of
valour²⁵ like the son of Isis, the heir of Re when he appears on his
throne, the great nobleman, lord of the double crown, the one with a
shiny appearance <like> Harakhte, king of Upper and Lower Egypt,
lord of both lands (empty).

² *ntr pn wnn.f hn' 3st Nbt-hwt
m ndty.sn m hns.sn izwt
h3pwt r hh sn.sn Wsir ii.n.f r
'lpw [...] ³ dd.ti hr irt s3.f hr
irt n k3.f R' r tm [dit]²⁶ 'k St
hn' sm3yt.f r.f m 3w n nhh hr
s3 nb[f?] hr [...] ...?... pr.f
[...] dt*

² This god: He is together with Isis and Nephthys, protecting them
when they travel through the hidden²⁷ mounds to find their brother
Osiris. He came to Akhmim [...], ³ while he provides his protection
and acts for his Ka Re²⁸ to prevent Seth and his companions from
entering during *nhh*-time, while he protects [his?] lord ...?... when
he emerges [...] eternally.

²⁵ Suggested reading by J.Fr. Quack (cf. *LGG* III, 760b).

²⁶ A *tm*-sign is not clearly recognizable. The proposal to amend *[dit]* was made by J.Fr. Quack.

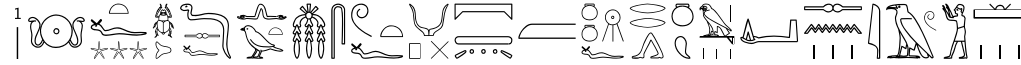
²⁷ Suggested reading by M. Gabolde.

²⁸ Once attested in a designation of Atum in a ritual scene concerning the set up of the pillar of Heliopolis (*LGG* VII, 238b).



Fig. 17. Inscription 13 and scene 14 (photomerge).

13. Text line above the ritual scene in the passage:



¹ *nsw-bity it ntrw hpr ds.f* ¹ King of Upper and Lower Egypt, father of gods who created
iwty mswt.f wp pt t3 m wbn.f himself, whose birth does not exist, who opens sky and earth when
phr n.f ntrw dī.sn izw he appears, the one to whom the gods come to give praise.

14. Ritual scene in the passage:



³ *f3t ht n nb ht shtp it.f m mr* ³ Holding offerings for the lord of offerings. Satisfy his father with
it.f the things his father loves.

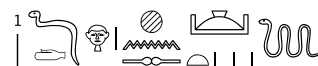


⁴ *dd mdw in Tm hns izwt* ⁵ ⁴ Words spoken by Atum who travels through the mounds, ⁵ the
w3dd nb T3-mri wd 'nh n agathodaimon²⁹, lord of Egypt who provides life for the living.
'nhw



⁶ *ir(.i) ht (?) n nb 'nh pr im* ⁶ I make offerings (?)³⁰ for the lord of life who emerges there. My
h' ib(.i) [n] m33.k heart rejoices [at] seeing you.

15. Inner side, left door-jamb, upper part:



¹ *dd hr hns izwt* ¹ The face of the one who travels through the mounds has said³¹.

²⁹ LGG II, 266c-267b.

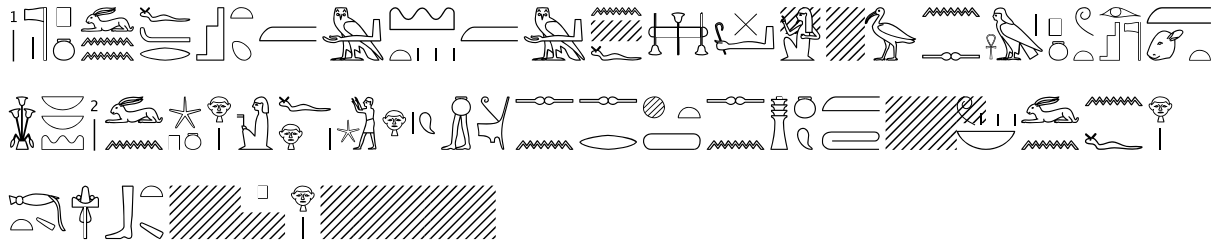
³⁰ This passage is unclear since at the beginning there is definitely an *r* and not a *ir*. Moreover, the next two signs would have been interchanged.

³¹ This translation derives from a proposal made by S. Lippert on the 5th Ptolemaic Summer School in Montpellier. The passage seems to be a clear indication of Atum's function as an oracle god.



Fig. 18. Scene 15 and inscription 16 (photomerge).

16. Inner side, left door-jamb, lower part:



¹ *ntr pn wnn.f hn' 3st m-m
 h3swt mwnf hb.n.s b3 'nh pw
 n Wsir m-hnt H3w-nbwt*
² *wnn ntr pn hr szw.f hr dw3
 hr.f in.sn s(w) r ht.sn dd.n.f
 m-k3b [...] nbw wnn.f hr mhty
 izbtt [...] hr [...]*

¹ This god: He is together with Isis as protector³² in the foreign lands, which she (Isis?) had entered (?)³³. This is the living Ba of Osiris in front of the Greek islands. ² This god protects him and praises his face. They conduct him to his offerings. He endured in all [...]. He is in the northeast of [...].

³² Suggested reading by D. Meeks.

³³ Without determinative it is uncertain if the ibis could be read as *hb*. Another possibility is to read *rh.n.s*: "the one she knew".



Fig. 19. Scene 17 and inscription 18 (photomerge).

17. Inner side, right door-jamb, upper part:

¹ *Dwn-h3t.f*¹ The one whose forehead is extending forward³⁴.

18. Inner side, right door-jamb, lower part:



¹ *ntr pn wnn.f hr izbtt rsy m*
i(3)w (?) hr.s <r> mhty niwt
tn r h3w [...] ² *hr srwd m3't m*
'Ipw hr h[s]r kkw [...] *n nb*
hddwt [...]

¹ This god: He is in the southeast praising her face (?). Her face is turned towards the north³⁵. This town is near [...] ² proclaiming³⁶ Maat in Akhmim, driving away [...] darkness³⁷ for the lord of light [...]³⁸

³⁴ All of the 20 records in *LGG* VII, 526c-527b are without suffix. To be understood as a gesture of protection (*Wb* V, 431, 12).

³⁵ Suggested reading by D. Meeks.

³⁶ Suggested reading by J.Fr. Quack.

³⁷ Cf. the expressions in *LGG* V, 963b-964b.

³⁸ Approx. 46cm are still covered by earth. The stone is very fragile in this part of the doorway. In order to preserve the text, the earth was left in place.



Fig. 20. Scene 19, northern part.



Fig. 21. Scene 19, southern part.

19. Ceiling:



¹ *Nḥbt ḥdt Nḥn dī.s 'nh dd* ¹ Nechet, the white one of Hierakonpolis. May she give every life,

w3s nb [n nsw-bity] nb t3wy
(empty)

stability and power [to the king of Upper and Lower Egypt], lord of both lands (empty).

¹ *W3dt nbt P Dp di.s snb nb n*
s3 R nb h'w (empty)

¹ Wadjet, mistress of Pe and Dep. May she give all health to the son of Re, lord of crowns (empty).

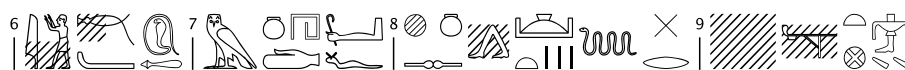


Fig. 22. East side of the passage.

Atum

In the inscriptions of the doorway, well known aspects of Atum are combined with rather uncommon ones. His characteristics as primeval being, creator and solar god³⁹, as well as his appearance as a snake, are frequently attested. But the doorway of Akhmim offers a surprise regarding his shape, because Atum is represented in scene No. 9 as a falcon-headed snake, a form that does not appear elsewhere⁴⁰. In Athribis there is another depiction of Atum as a snake beside a local monograph including information about designations of rooms and the temple of Athribis. There, Atum is shown as a snake standing on its tail. He is named *Tm m nwn [n]hw nfr wnn.f hr sm3 ht hr mhṯy n nīwt*: „Atum within Nun, the perfect protector when he receives offerings in the north of the city (?)”⁴¹. The designation “Atum within Nun” is connected to inscription No. 10 of the doorway in Akhmim, where it is said that the god emerged at the beginning of time (*sp tpy*) when the earth was still within Nun (*īw t3 m nwn*). Another close connection to Athribis can be found in Atum’s particular epithet *hns ī3wt*: “the one who travels through the hills” (No. 14, l. 4 und 15, l. 1). The sign 𐩔 seems to be the determinative of this expression.

In the soubassement of an unpublished column in Athribis (Y 19), there is a depiction of the papyrus thicket of Chemmis⁴² in which Isis is nursing the Horus falcon. The bushes are flanked, i. e. protected by a snake with four bodies (or four separate snakes) who have this accompanying inscription:



*ī (?)*⁴³ *mhn 3 m nhd.f hns ī3wt wr [...] nb idbw*

O (?) great encircler in his wrath, who travels through the mounds, the one with big [...] who created the two shores.

It is a great pity that the toponym in line 9 is not preserved. This would have supplied decisive information about the place of cult for that snake (in Akhmim? *Mnw?* *Hnty-Mnw?*). The fact that in this text *hns ī3wt* shows the same snake determinative as on the doorway of Akhmim indicates that it is the same creature in both instances. By comparing the scene in Athribis with two related scenes showing Isis nursing the Horus child in the mammisis of Dendara and

³⁹ There is no need to discuss this aspect here in extenso. As an example see K. MYSLIWIEC, *Studien zum Gott Atum II. Name – Epitheta – Ikonographie*, HÄB 8, Hildesheim, 1979, 175-181; S. BICKEL, *La cosmogonie égyptienne avant le Nouvel Empire*, OBO 134, Fribourg Suisse, 1994, 33-53; 56-59 (for the term *sp tpy* as the moment of creation); ZIVIE-COCHE, in: Fr. Dunand, Chr. Zivie-Coche, *Hommes et Dieux en Égypte*, Paris, 2006, 76-78; LGG VIII, 703a-b and 706a-b.

⁴⁰ See K. MYSLIWIEC, *Studien zum Gott Atum I. Die heiligen Tiere des Atum*, HÄB 5, Hildesheim, 1978, 95-117; cf. also LGG VII, 412b.

⁴¹ *Athribis* II, 8 and 11 = C 1, 36. The corresponding scene on the other side of the gate shows a snake standing on her tail, as well. It is depicted in front of a monograph concerning *res sacrae* of Athribis (*Athribis* II, 3-5 = C 1, 24). This text is far less well preserved. It is not possible to read Atum. Probably it is the holy snake (*s3-t3 ntry*) called ‘*nh-hh*’: “the one with living Heh figure”, which is mentioned in the accompanying inscription.

⁴² For the decoration of the soubassement of the columns in Athribis and its relationship to the decoration of the frieze in the sanctuary of the Roman Mammisi in Dendara and of the architraves in the Mammisi of Edfu, see MENDEL, in: A. Rickert, B. Ventker, *Altägyptische Enzyklopädien, Die Soubassements in den Tempeln der griechisch-römischen Zeit, Soubassementstudien* I/2, 819-839. Since this publication, the uncovering of columns Y 1 to Y 6 in the last excavation campaigns has led to an increase in the number of protective gods attested in that temple.

⁴³ It might also be the group 𐩔. This would argue against the emendation to *ī3w <n>* “praise for”.

Edfu [fig. 23-24], it is notable that there are four cobras, as well⁴⁴. In terms of Egyptian conventions of presentation this can be understood as each snake belonging to one of the four cardinal points.

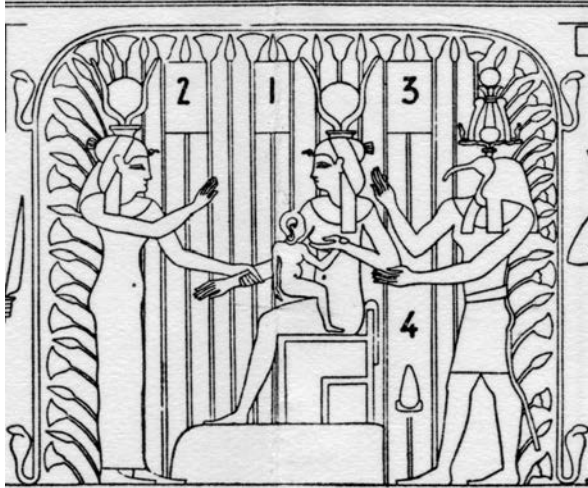


Fig. 23. Isis nursing Horus in the Roman Mammisi of Dendara.

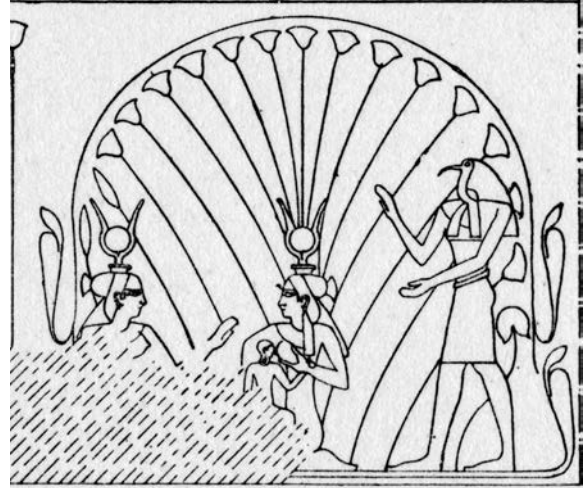


Fig. 24. Isis nursing Horus in the Mammisi of Edfu.

An unusual aspect mentioned in the texts of the doorway is the protection of Osiris (inscription No. 12) carried out by the anonymous snake depicted in scene No. 11.

Above each of the long inscriptions carved on the door-jambs and the door thicknesses, there is an image of a snake designated as *ntr pn*: “this god” by an accompanying text. The text of the outer right door-jamb (No. 9 and 10) mentions aspects of a primeval god, suggesting that the snake may be Atum here. On the inner left jamb (No. 15 and 16) the epithet *hns izwt* clearly identifies the snake with Atum, since in the ritual scene of the passage (No. 14) he bears the same title. In the case of the inner right jamb (No. 17 and 18), the snake is named *Dwn-h3t.f*. Already in the Coffin texts this god (*Dwn-h3t* – without suffix) is attested as a protective god. Nothing is known about a potential identification with Atum. Even though an inscription labelling the snake is missing from the inner left jamb (No. 11), there is one argument for its identification as Atum. In inscription No. 16, where it is clearly Atum, it is said that this god is in company of Isis (*ntr pn wnn.f hn' 3st*). A very similar formulation (*ntr pn wnn.f hn' 3st Nbt-hwt*) occurs in inscription No. 12, as well. Thus it is quite possible that the snake represents Atum in this case too.

Apart from Atum, inscription No. 12 follows a common pattern: Isis and Nephtys cross the country in search of their dead brother in order to mummify and protect him from his hostile brother Seth⁴⁵. Inscription No. 16 seems to deal with a similar topic. Here, “this god” (Atum)

⁴⁴ *D Mammisi*, pl. 61bis and *E Mammisi*, pl. 43, 3. Also in the mammisi it is possible that the four snake bodies belong to one creature.

⁴⁵ A text with a similar structure is *D V*, 31, 6-7: *Hnst hnst izwt nt t3 hkrh h'w nw Wr[d-ib] irt mkt n hry mkt*: “Chensit who travels through the mounds of the land, who protects the body of the wea[ry-hearted], who offers protection to the overseer of protection (= Osiris; cf. *D VI*, 84, 1-2)”. Because of a pun it is obvious that Chensit of the 20th Lower Egyptian nome is connected with Isis, and in fact this goddess is also elsewhere associated

who crosses the hills is together with Isis *m-m h3swt*. Considering the *H3w-nbwt* mentioned later, this expression is more likely to be translated as “foreign lands” than “deserts”.

The gloss in inscription No. 16, stating that Atum *hns i3wt* is the living Ba of Osiris in front of the Greek islands (*b3 'nh pw n Wsir m-hnt H3w-nbwt*), is puzzling. Already Osiris' link to foreign countries is exceptional. A reference by Plutarch in *De Iside et Osiride*, chapter 15 saying that the coffin containing the corpse of Osiris had washed up onto the shores of Byblos⁴⁶, does not help much since in Ptolemaic times *H3w-nbwt* refers to the Greek Islands, not to the Levantine coast⁴⁷. Perhaps the solution can be found in a geographical text of a nome procession in Edfu. The inscription referring to the canal of the 17th Lower Egyptian nome of Tell el-Balamun bordering the Mediterranean Sea says:

in.f n.k/t Hnt-sm3-r3 hr w3d-wr.f hr shd m-ht H3w-nbwt

He brings to you the *Hnt-sm3-r3*-canal with his sea water, flowing towards the Greek islands⁴⁸.

Osiris often refers to the inundation, which discharges at least partly into the Mediterranean near Tell el-Balamun; thus the Ba of Osiris could reach the *H3w-nbwt* in this way.

Finally, Atum's function as an oracle god is a remarkable. This aspect is evident from the notation of *dd hr hns i3wt*: The face of the one who travels through the mounds has said.⁴⁹ If S. Lippert's assumption expressed at the 5th Ptolemaic Summer School is right, the movements of a statue of a snake or even a living animal (probably a cobra) would have been the medium through which the oracle questions were answered. A movement to the front would have been interpreted as yes, a movement to the back as no.⁵⁰

Purpose of the chapel

Unfortunately the structures presented above were located 5m beneath actual floor level in the historic centre of Akhmim and were not discovered in the course of a regular excavation. Therefore it is unlikely that more of the building will be uncovered in the near future. We can only offer speculations concerning the shape and the purpose of the complex.

A possible assumption is to consider the uncovered structures to be part of a chapel for the snake shaped god Atum *hns i3wt*. This chapel could be part of the so-called necropolis of primeval gods, which may have existed in every Egyptian nome. Unfortunately until now

with Isis (see J. OSING, *Hieratische Papyri aus Tebtynis I*, CNI Publications 17, Copenhagen, 1998, 163 and 165, n. h). Another text with a similar content and chronological order and containing the use of the verb *hh*: “to search” is located in the Sokar chamber of Dendara. The passage in *D II*, 153, 4-5 reads: *dd mdw in Nbt-hwt mnht snt ntr hht h 'w-ntr m niwwt hnt dt nt db3ty mkt s3t3.f hr nmit.f irt nht.f r sbiw dit s3.f hr p.f n dt nn ky whmt3.f*: “Words spoken by Nephthys the splendid one, sister of the god, who searches the god's members in the mounds, who protects the body of the one who belongs to the coffin, who prepares his shelter on the bier, who provides his protection against foes, who puts his son on his throne of eternity, whose repeater does not exist.”

⁴⁶ See Th. HOPFNER, *Plutarch. Über Isis und Osiris I*, Prag, 1940, 7 and 49-56.


⁴⁷ See FAVARD-MEEKS, *SAK* 16, 1989, 62-63; QUACK, in: R. Rollinger *et al.* (eds.), “Getrennte Wege? Kommunikation, Raum und Wahrnehmung in der Alten Welt”, *Oikumene* 2, Frankfurt, 2007, 331 with n. 1 and 340-349 (result: none of the texts speaks to a localisation northeast of Egypt).

⁴⁸ *E IV*, 35, 11-12 and *D XII*, 198, 5-6. To this cf. QUACK, in: R. Rollinger *et al.* (eds.), “Getrennte Wege? Kommunikation, Raum und Wahrnehmung in der Alten Welt”, *Oikumene* 2, Frankfurt, 2007, 340.

⁴⁹ See VOLOKHINE, *BIFAO* 102, 2002, 412-416 with many references.

⁵⁰ Cf. KAKOSY, in: *LÄ IV*, 600, s.v. Orakel. For an overview of the oracles in Roman Egypt see TALLET, in: Chr. Riggs (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt*, Oxford, 2012, 398-418.

there is almost no archaeological evidence for this kind of necropolis, which is attested primarily in written sources⁵¹. Indications as to this interpretation are as follows:

1. Terminology: The *izwt*-mounds mentioned on the door (inscription No. 12, 14, 15) could refer to the necropolis of primeval gods called *izt ntryt*.
2. In Edfu the introduction of the monographs concerning the nomes of Egypt calls the sacred snakes  *b3w ntrw 'nhw m izwt*: “Bas of the gods which live in the hills”⁵². This means *izwt* can refer to the single *izt ntryt*. The individual snakes are named in the following inscriptions of the so-called nome processions. Regrettably all texts dealing with the 9th Upper Egyptian nome are destroyed.
3. In inscription No. 16 the snake *hns izwt* is called the living Ba of Osiris (*b3 'nh n Wsir*). This expression is similar to *b3w ntrw 'nhw m izwt*. Therefore it is likely that *Tm hns izwt* is one of the sacred snakes of the 9th Upper Egyptian nomes⁵³.
4. Geographical papyri dealing with the *res sacrae* of Egyptian nomes mention a sacred snake called ‘h’ “agathodaimon”⁵⁴. In temple inscriptions *w3dd*⁵⁵ is another designation for ‘h’ (*nfr*). It is equally translated as “agathodaimon”. At the doorway of Akhmim (No. 14) Atum *hns izwt* is called *w3dd*, as well. His epithet *w3 'nh n 'nhw*: “the one who gives life to the living” correlates with the well known aspect of the *w3ddw*-snakes as gods of provisioning⁵⁶.
5. In the texts of the doorway Atum’s aspect as primeval god is obvious (inscription No. 10 and 13).
6. According to Waitkus protecting Osiris and his tomb are some of the tasks of the sacred snakes⁵⁷. An analogous statement is mentioned in inscription No. 16 of the chapel: *ntr pn hr szw.f*: “This god (= *hns izwt*) protects him (= Osiris)”. Inscription No. 12 resembles this text by saying the snake god (= Atum?), Isis and Nephtys provide protection for Osiris (*hr irt sz.f* and later *hr sz nb[f?]*) and furthermore prevent Seth and his companions from entering.

All in all this could indicate that the doorway led to a district of Akhmim in which the necropolis of primeval gods and the local tomb of Osiris were located. Since the orientation of the building shows that this district lies in the southwest, the direction for further excavations is clear. Regrettably residential buildings cover this area.

⁵¹ For the following cf. WAITKUS, “Die Beziehungen der Heiligen Schlangen zur Urgötternekropole (*izt ntryt*) and for the deceased primeval gods see *ibid*”, in: D. Kurth, W. Waitkus, *Edfu: Materialien und Studien, Die Inschriften des Tempels von Edfu Beigleitheft* 6, Gladbeck, 2010, 131-162; *id.*, in: W. Waitkus, *Diener des Horus. Festschrift für Dieter Kurth zum 65. Geburtstag, Aegyptiaca Hamburgensia* 1, Gladbeck, 2008, 265-282; Chr. LEITZ, *Die Gaumonographien in Edfu und ihre Papyrusvarianten, SSR* 9, Wiesbaden, 2014, 407-409 and 421-428.

⁵² E I, 337, 2 = LEITZ, *Gaumonographien in Edfu*, 421.

⁵³ For *b3w 'nhw*, the designation of the sacred snake, see the references at WAITKUS, in: *Fs Kurth.*, 280-281. For the singular form of *b3 'nh* as a protective snake of Osiris see also D. MEEKS, *Mythes et légendes du Delta d’après le papyrus Brooklyn 47.218.84, MIFAO* 125, Le Caire, 2006, 41, n. 12.

⁵⁴ LEITZ, *Gaumonographien in Edfu*, 421.

⁵⁵ For various examples see WAITKUS, in: *Fs Kurth.*, 267, 270, 272 and more.

⁵⁶ WAITKUS, in: *Fs Kurth.*, 277.

⁵⁷ W. WAITKUS, in: D. Kurth, W. Waitkus, *Edfu: Materialien und Studien, Die Inschriften des Tempels von Edfu Beigleitheft* 6, Gladbeck, 2010, 157.

It is uncertain if the two monographs and the erected snakes in Athribis are connected with this necropolis for primeval gods. Compared to common monographs dealing with nomes, the inscription on the left door frame in Athribis (C 1, 24) mentions less *res sacrae*. Interestingly the few that are mentioned are those one would expect for a necropolis for primeval gods: a name of a sacred snake and two names of sacred trees⁵⁸. The snake receives daily offerings and libations at a place glossed as *ỉȝt p(w) nt Mnw*: “the hill of Min”. After a gap an explanation follows: “This is the sanctuary (iwnn) located behind the cave of the splendid one (*tpht-ȝht*)⁵⁹. Every daily ritual for this god is performed there (*ỉr.tw ỉrw nb n ntr pn ỉm r' nb*)”⁶⁰. The expression *ntr pn* is reminiscent of the chapel in Akhmim where the snake god is designated in the same way (inscriptions No. 10, 12, 16, 18). Neither the location nor the function of the *tpht ȝht* is defined, but it should be mentioned that in Memphis a sacred place with the similar name *tpht-dȝt* often refers to the local tomb of Osiris⁶¹. In addition in an unpublished text of Athribis (J 4, 4, l. 11), the *tpht-ȝht* is glossed *štȝ.n.s ỉmy.s*: “she has hidden the one who/what is inside her”, which at the very least does not argue against its interpretation as a tomb of Osiris.

On the other side of the door in Athribis (C 1, 36) “Atum within Nun, the perfect protector (?), when he receives offerings in the north of (this) town (*wnn.f hr smȝ ht hr mhty n niwt [tn?]*)”⁶² is mentioned. Perhaps this information about Atum relates to the newly discovered complex in Akhmim, which lies in the northeast of Athribis (= *niwt [tn?]*). To this interpretation (1.) the passage of inscription No. 10 would fit: *ntr pn hpr.f m sp tpy ỉw tȝ m nwn*: “This god: he came into being in primeval times, when the earth was still within Nun.” (2.) Also inscription No. 16 is notable. Concerning Atum *hns ỉȝwt* it is said that, *wnn.f hr mhty ỉȝbtt [...]*: “He is in the northeast of [...]”. Unfortunately the name of the location is not preserved. It is unclear if *mhty ỉȝbtt* is followed by *n hwt-Rpwt*. In terms of geography this would fit perfectly. Moreover, the expression *wnn.f hr* is reminiscent of the Athribis text quoted above.

The fact that the main text of C 1, 36 (i. e. not the accompanying text of the snake) has a parallel in room D 3 does not quite fit this picture⁶³. The beginning is as follows: *ỉr ỉȝt ntryt nty [hr] ỉmntt nt 'Ipw*: “Concerning the hill, which is west of Akhmim”. The term *ỉȝt ntryt* would clearly refer to a necropolis of primeval gods. However, the position in the west of Akhmim mentioned in that text cannot refer to the new chapel. Rather since the text is engraved into the walls of Athribis temple, it probably refers to the west of Athribis, the area close to Athribis⁶⁴ or Athribis itself. The Athribis temple can be excluded because at the end of that text it is said that the face is orientated to the west in direction of this mountain (*pr pn hr.f r ỉmntt r dȝw pn*). Thus another heretofore unknown sanctuary may exist in this location. If this interpretative approach is correct two necropolises of primeval gods can be expected in that area: one in Akhmim and one in Athribis.

Another important aspect of the newly discovered monument in Akhmim is its possible function as an oracle site for the snake-shaped Atum. In the immediate vicinity, interesting

⁵⁸ Athribis II, 3.

⁵⁹ Or adjectivally „splendid cave“.

⁶⁰ Athribis II, 4.

⁶¹ See LEITZ, *Gaumonographien in Edfu*, 183 with further references.

⁶² Athribis II, 8.

⁶³ Athribis II, 547 (= D 3, 13), cf. the synopsis at p. 603-604.

⁶⁴ Soon afterwards in the lost context a *dȝw m*: “mountain in” is mentioned. Probably it is the nearby gebel in Athribis.

artefacts such as ostraca containing oracle questions, votives and small altars might still be present. This possibility makes a complete archaeological documentation of the site highly desirable.

Plate I

Outer door frame

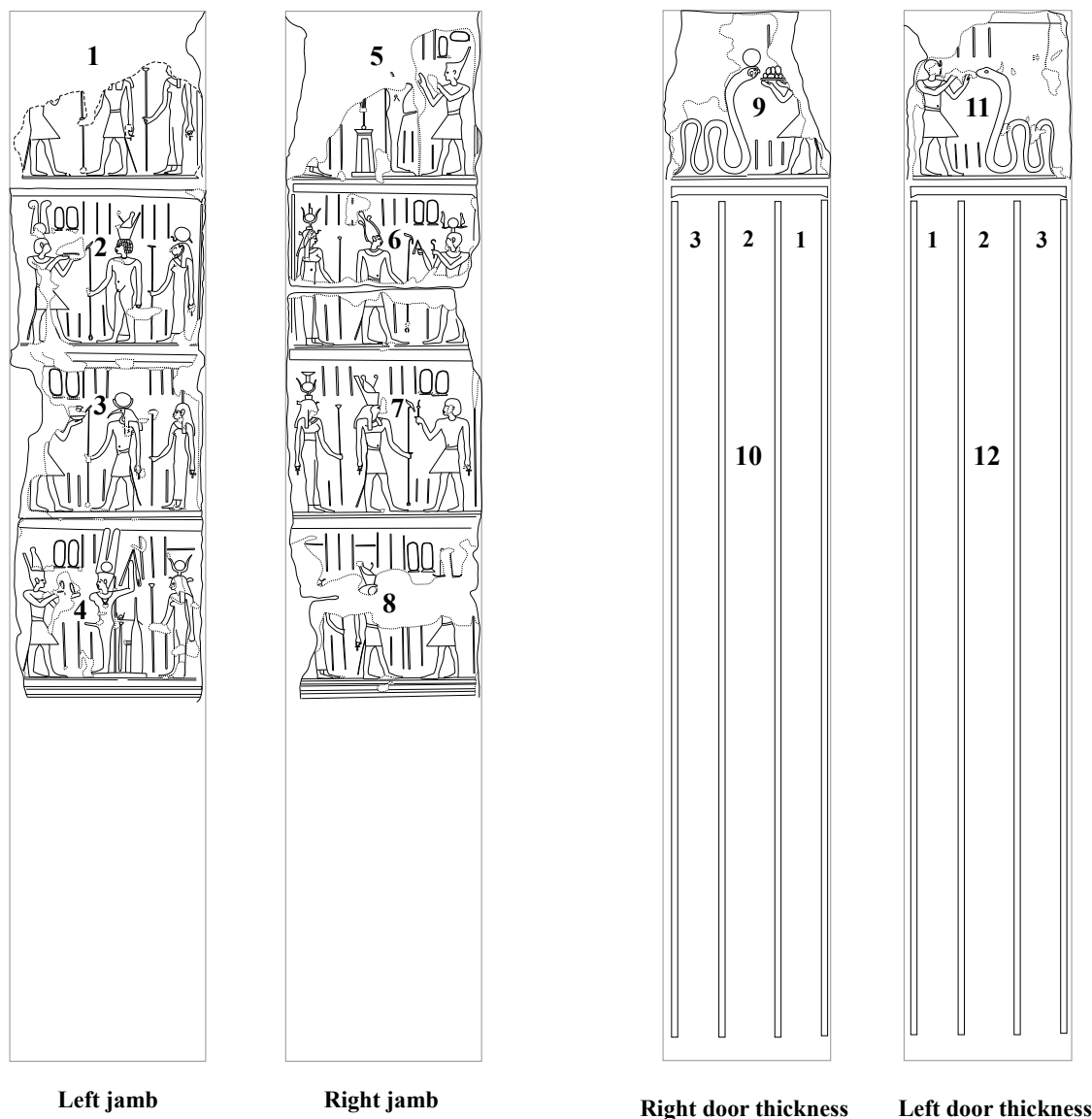


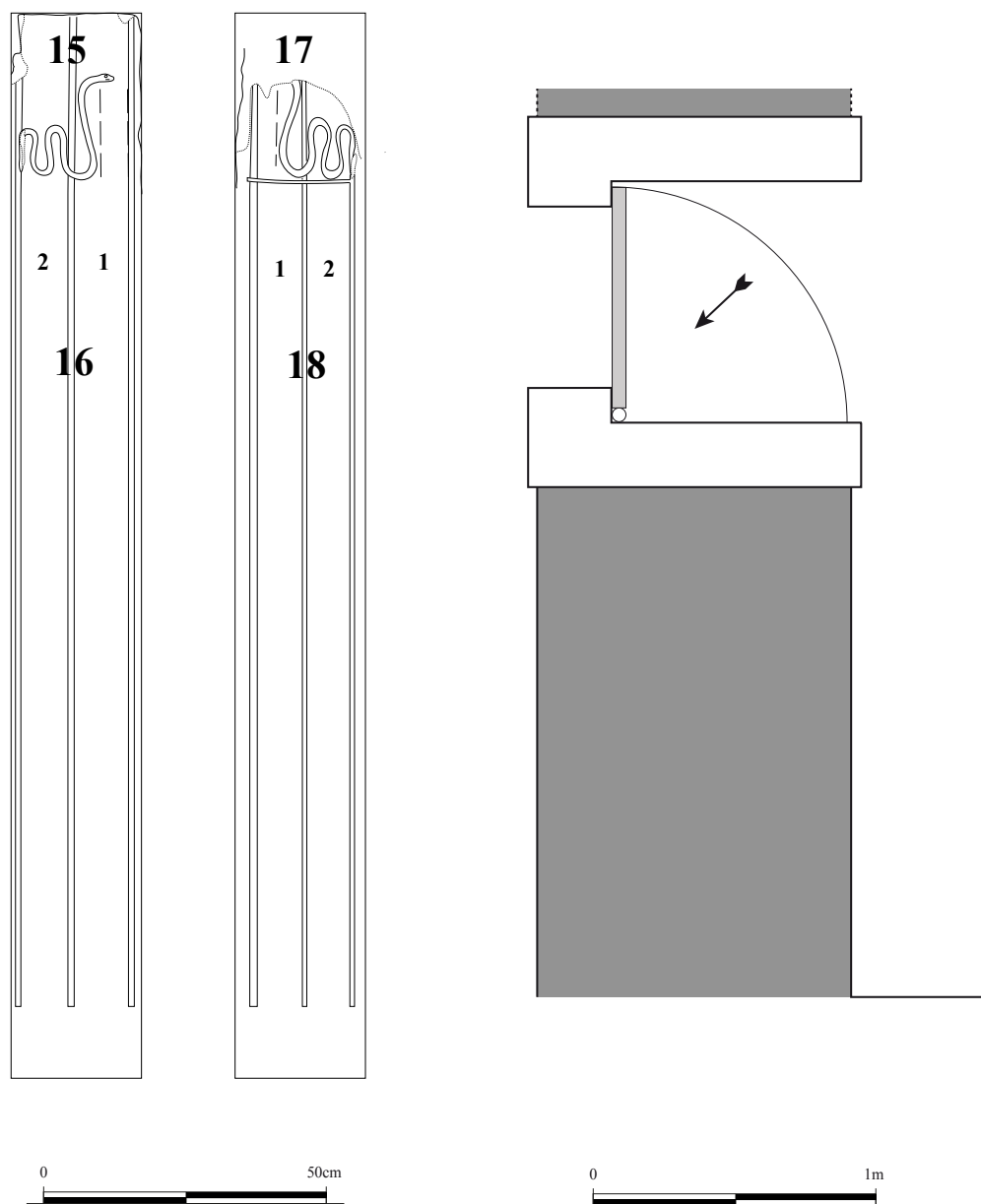
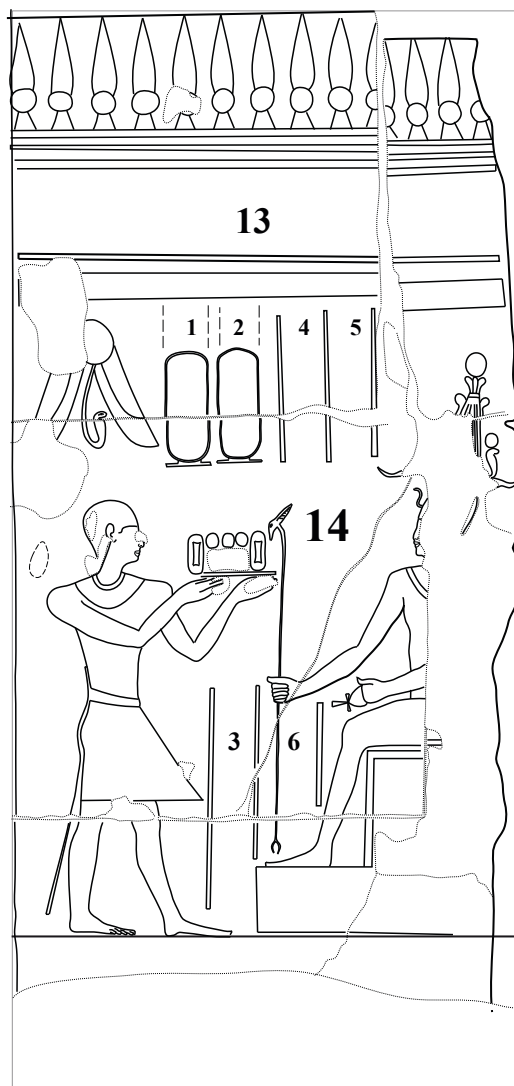
Plate II

Plate III

Passage, west side



Ceiling

