

Essex Egyptology Group: 1 June 2025: Dr Peter Brand: From the 2025 Season of the Karnak Great Hypostyle Hall project.

In June, Dr Peter Brand gave the group a revealing talk via Zoom about his research with a team to record, analyse and publish the texts on the southern and northern walls of Karnak's Hypostyle Hall.

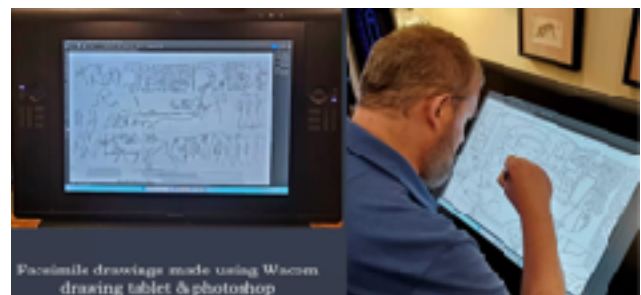
The **Hypostyle Hall** was built c1300 BCE by Seti I - the largest single addition to Karnak Temple, being the domain dedicated to Amun-Ra. The pictorial and inscription decoration of the northern half was completed before Seti's death. His son, Rameses II, completed the decoration of the southern exterior wall of the Hypostyle Hall and the 12 great columns of its central nave.



The previous project phase had recorded the **Battle Scenes of Rameses II** on the southern exterior wall between 1995 and 2005 using the traditional method of tracing on the wall with pencil in sections. These results were okay but not definitive, so a new set of detailed drawings of the battle scenes were proposed and work began on these during 2024, continuing in 2025.

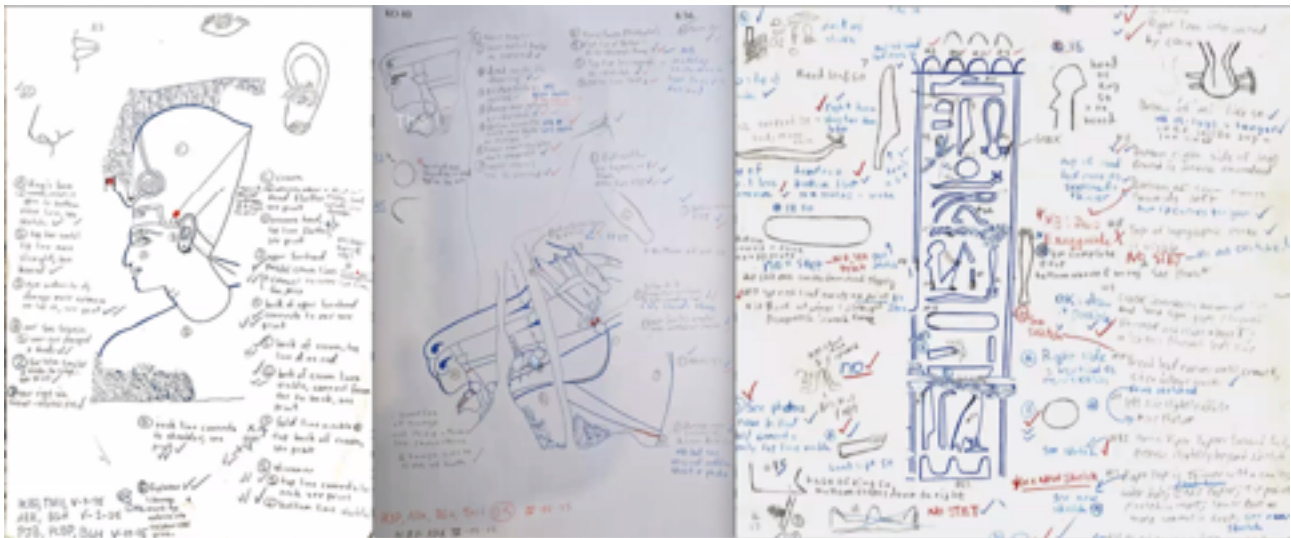
The decoration on the wall comprises three horizontal registers. The work focused on the bottom register scenes. Along with this work, some site management was also undertaken to remove clutter and give a more user-friendly look for visitors. The war scenes are badly weathered, eroded and therefore in poor condition. Also, original chisel marks had not been smoothed, making the inscriptions more difficult to read - a thankless task for those recording them.

The main image shows Rameses in his chariot along with smaller scenes depicting the attack on two Syrian towns. Photographs are taken and used as the basis for making facsimile drawings of the reliefs. Whereas photos obscure details, irrespective of the type and direction of lighting, using a Wacom drawing tablet along with Photoshop enabling facsimile drawings to filter out confusing elements - the background 'noise' - so that drawings show only what is epigraphically significant.



When working with a team of student epigraphers to make outline drawings, a mirror is used to direct light to improve image clarity. There are illumination differences between raised and sunk relief. This is indicated by differing line thicknesses. Only significant missing areas are shaded; other marks are ignored and left clean. Judgment is needed to provide maximum possible clarity.

Initial drawings are annotated with corrective sketches and notes. The collation process involves teams of epigraphers at the wall who each make detailed observations and comments on the drawings and compare them to the wall reliefs. Then each team of epigraphists separately check each set of collation sheets, consult to compare notes - agree with a red check mark (tick). The emphasis is on team effort, not competition. Co-operation is the key - there is no room for drama queens!



Annotated collation sheets include blueprint sections to indicate corrections for guide epigraphers to make final drawings as faithful to the original as possible, while red is used to indicate minor errors in the initial drawings to ensure those will be erased in the final drawing. These sheets are then agreed and signed off to allow artists to work on.



As the face of Rameses II on the main image is about 15ft off the ground, scaffolding is employed to be level with it for drawing. Different lighting conditions - controlled with mirrors to bounce raking light - is used to enhance faint details. Finger Touch is also used to feel invisible details. Subtle details can be easily misinterpreted, overlooked or drawn incorrectly. Sometimes, the faintest traces can be felt but not seen. Judgment is needed to decide what to record or not - important details or irrelevant scrape lines? This prevents the drawing from becoming cluttered up.

The west wall of the **Cour de La Cachette** contains **Rameses II's Hittite Peace Treaty** in between the northern and southern scenes from Merenptah's reign. This had not been copied since the 1800s when the Chicago House method was originally used to record these.

The **Merenptah's scenes** show his assault on the town of Ashkelon, and includes the name 'YSYRIAL' (Israel) written in hieroglyphs on the west wall which corresponds to Merenptah's famous so-called 'Israel Stela', though this is a misnomer as it is more likely to refer to the people - the Israelites - rather than the territory of Israel. They are shown as a sub-group of Canaanites without a city, though the reliefs are poorly preserved on the west wall.

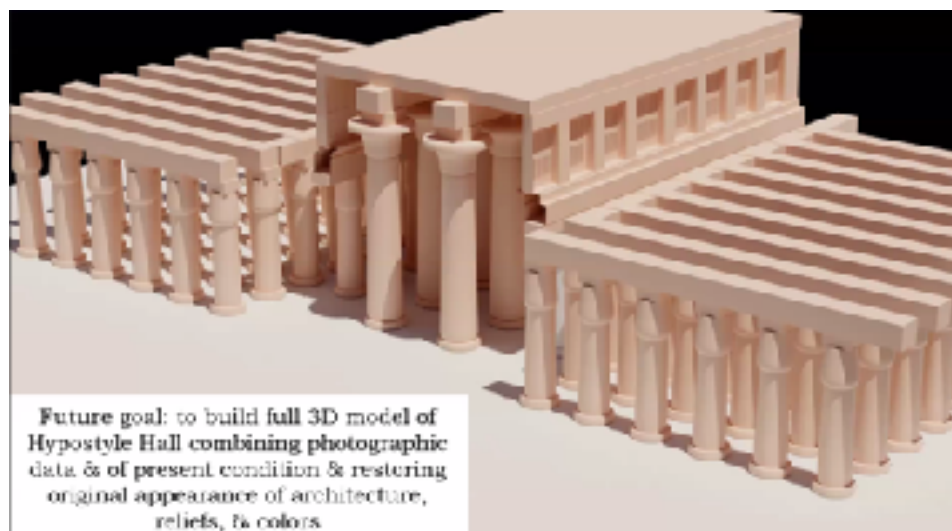
In 2016, the present Hypostyle Hall Project's Consortium worked with Lipscomb University, a Christian college in Nashville Tennessee, and in April 2025, the Lipscomb team trained 4 Egyptian inspectors in epigraphic methodology.

A new facsimile of the Rameses II Hittite Peace Treaty was begun in 2023. The treaty text is full of damaged and lost sections. Prof. Kitchen and others had made some rather daring restorations of it, based on his extensive knowledge of hieroglyphic texts. The current Hypostyle Hall Project team are working to restore missing or damaged text by comparing these areas to intact parallels elsewhere in the text. As with the pictorial scenes, a photo montage approach is employed, which involves taking several photos from slightly different angles. These are then fed into a computer programme to produce a single, flat, undistorted image which eliminates perspective distortions.

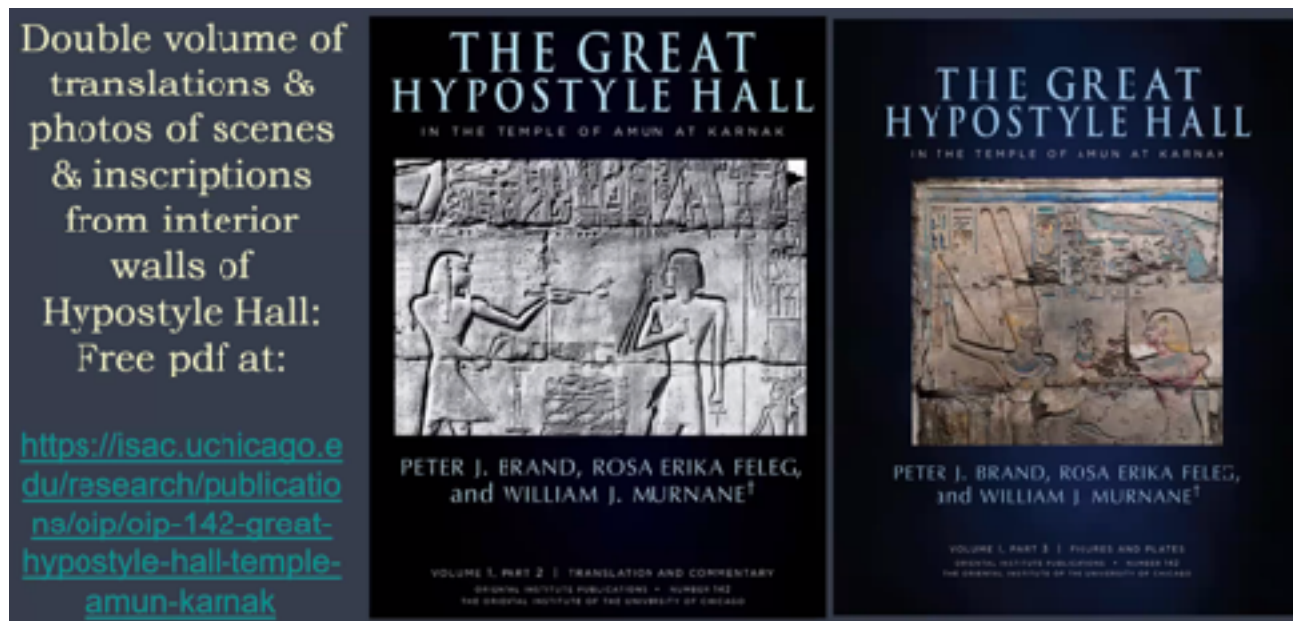
An initial Hand-drawn version of the 38 registers of hieroglyphs was then produced with the aid of the epigraphic photos and comparative analysis to either confirm or refute previous restorations. Using the initial hand-drawn copy, this season the project team began to make a more formal hand copy of the Hittite Treaty text, using their growing confidence in reconstructing the damaged text. This is still a work in progress - currently around halfway through - so another season will be needed to complete it.

This more formal drawing will also produce the font palaeography of the glyphs - their precise shape & style - as well as the actual text - accurate copying helps a more accurate dating of the inscription.

The Hittite version of this treaty only survives as a clay cuneiform copy of the original silver tablet which probably would have been taken as booty by invaders then melted down.



Peter's Book on Rameses II gives more background detail on the scenes commemorated on the Hypostyle walls. He asks people to leave reviews on Amazon to help raise its profile.



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Q & A

The upper part of wall was dismantled. Is it possible to reconstruct the entire wall?

There are thousands of blocks awaiting jigsaw puzzling back into their original position. The French Mission has already rebuilt large parts of the east wall.

A question concerning the location of the ram's head sphinxes

The ram's head sphinxes, which have small mummiform protective statues of Rameses II, were moved by Nectanebo I to make room for the construction of the First Pylon. They originally formed part of the processional way.

What would be the best day to view the south wall in optimal light?

Between noon and 1pm to give best shadows, though this differs for north, west and east, as well as at different times of year. Sometimes it is best at 6am. Time & location is key, so work is done early morning to noon or 1pm before temperatures become excessive. So many inscriptions have not been scientifically recorded.

Michael Tweddle
17/6/25