The Heliopolis Project, a joint Egyptian-German mission, is slowly revealing the great temple complex at the centre of ancient Egypt’s universe. In this article, we help you make sense of the fragmented finds unearthed each season at Heliopolis.
It is fitting that in the centre of a small park in the noisy, northeastern outskirts of Cairo—a site hemmed in by apartment buildings and the crazy bustle of the modern suburb of Matariya—the main reminder of the location’s glorious, pious past is an obelisk.

A great temple without equal once stood here, dotted with obelisks; each raised to catch the infant glow of every new dawn. This may have been the birthplace of these colossal offerings to the gods. Today, the only one left also happens to be Egypt’s oldest standing obelisk. It was raised to the glory of the sun-god Ra by the Middle Kingdom’s King Senuser I around 1950 b.c.

The temple complex’s gleaming columns gave a name to the surrounding city: ḫmwt, “place of pillars”. The Greeks identified Ra with their sun god, Helios, and the city was given its better-known and more colourful Greek name Heliopolis, meaning “city of the sun”, for this was the cult centre for the worship of the sun in his various forms, and the centre of the Egyptian universe. The most sacred part of the great complex was ḫwt-Benben—the Temple of the Benben stone.

Utterance 600 (above) from the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts tells us that the Heliopolis creator god took the form of a benu bird to perch on top of the sacred benben stone; divine light piercing the blackness. The first sound of the benu’s voice set time in motion. The Egyptians saw the benben stone as the stone of creation—the solidified seed of the creator god, Atum. It also represented the divine mound that rose from the timeless watery abyss on the first day of the cosmos, receiving the golden rays of the sun.

Early representations put the benben stone in the shape of a squat obelisk; possibly the inspiration for the design of the pyramids and obelisks, which, for the king, would perpetuate the daily act of creation, and the renewal of his divine kingship, forever. When the Pyramid Texts first appeared in the 5th-Dynasty pyramid of Unas (ca. 2375 b.c.), Heliopolis was already a major holy centre, with the benben at its heart.

The benben stone, as with most of Heliopolis, has long disappeared, swamped by the crush of suburban Matariya. The scattered remains of its great temples lay beneath a wasteland of rubbish and builders’ rubble. So what happened? It seems that once neglected, then actively abused, even a city that had resurrection at its core could only bounce back so many times. Heliopolis ran out of lives.

Although many Heliopolitan obelisks have disappeared (or are still waiting to be unearthed), records from other sources give us some indication of which pharaohs erected tapered tributes there. The Autobiography of Sabni, a regional governor who served King Pepi II (ca. 2200 b.c.) in Elephantine at the end of the Old Kingdom, states:

“Oh Atum-Kheprer, you have come to be high on the hill, you have arisen on the Benben stone in the mansion of the Benu-bird in Heliopolis.”

Pyramid Texts, Utterance 600
The majesty of my lord sent me to construct two great barges in Wawat so as to ship two great obelisks north to Heliopolis.

A thousand years later, on what is known as the Great Harris Papyrus (now in the British Museum, EA 9999), the endowments made by King Ramesses III (ca. 1160 B.C.) were recorded to the gods and temples of Thebes, Memphis, and Heliopolis. This included 12,963 people who were employed at the Heliopolis complex alone—not to mention 45,544 livestock. But by the time the Greek historian Strabo passed through, in around 28 B.C., it was virtually deserted. The Ptolemies (332–30 B.C.) instead poured their energies into beautifying their chosen capital, Alexandria. While they were also raising glorious new temples to Hathor at Dendera and Horus at Edfu, the finely-carved stones of Heliopolis were being toppled as handy building material for a lighthouse. The withdrawal of royal favour and the plunder of its stone put Heliopolis into decline. It was during this period that the sacred obelisks of Heliopolis began their second lives, reappearing in Alexandria, Rome and Constantinople.

Although it wasn’t part of ancient Egyptian tradition, the Phoenix—the Greek rendition of the benu bird—represented the cycle of life through burying itself in funeral pyres and subsequently rising from the ashes as a new youth. To the Egyptians the benu, shown here as a grey heron on the prow of the sacred barque of Ra-Horakhty-Atum, was the “ba” (soul) of Ra, and an eternal symbol of creation and renewal.

This painting of the Benu is from the ceiling of the 19th-Dynasty Theban tomb of Sennedjem (TT 1).

Heliopolis’ final blow was the Arab invasion of A.D. 641. Much of the new Muslim capital, Fustat (today part of Old Cairo) was built from recycled Heliopolitan blocks. Hieroglyphic inscriptions can still be seen on stones in the mosque of al-Hakim, begun in A.D. 990, and in the Old Cairo defence walls of A.D. 1087.

By the time of Napoleon’s French invasion of Egypt, Heliopolis’ fragmented ruins were buried beneath mounds of earth, but the once-giant mud-brick enclosure walls were still impressive: “The enclosure of the city is still very much recognisable; built of mud-brick, it is enormous,” wrote a member of the expedition, “In some places it stands up to eighteen metres.” Today, only traces of the walls remain, and the entire site is under increasing pressure from urban encroachment.

For all that has been lost, however, a surprising amount continues to be unearthed each season, which suggests that a lot remains to be discovered. Ongoing excavations by an Egyptian-German joint mission led by Dr. Aiman Ashmawy, Director of the Egyptian Archaeology Sector in the Ministry of Antiquities, and Dr. Dietrich Raue, curator at the Georg Steindorff Egyptian Museum at the University of Leipzig, are helping parts of the ancient City of the Sun once again see daylight.

Heliopolis made headlines in March this year when the mission dramatically lifted parts of a colossal statue from a muddy pit towards the northwestern corner of the Cairo suburb of Matariya. The site was known to be...
close to a previously discovered temple courtyard built for Ramesses II, and so speculation flew that a new colossus could be added to the king’s prolific tally. The hieroglyphs on the torso’s back pillar told a different story: this giant statue was carved for an altogether different pharaoh—the 26th-Dynasty’s Psamtek I (ca. 664 B.C.), who ruled some 550 years after the great Ramesses. This would make the statue the largest Late Period sculpture ever discovered, and a significantly more interesting find for Egyptologists. Being able to command the manpower required to create such a sculpture speaks volumes about the power of the king. It was much easier, of course, to simply “renew” a predecessor’s statue by replacing the old name with one’s own. Ramesses II was particularly given to appropriating other king’s grand designs (the earlier-mentioned courtyard, for example, was adorned with large statues of the Middle Kingdom’s Senusret I that Ramesses had moved there to add some splendour). So had Psamtek I usurped an older statue in a time-honoured tradition, or was this an original work? Dietrich Raue provides the answer:

“After Dr. Simon Connor, a member of our Egyptian-German Team had checked the parallels of several stylistic and iconographic features, there can be little doubt that the colossal statue is really dated to the 7th-century B.C. This was not that easy since the face of the sculpture itself was missing. After Dr. Simon Connor, a member of our Egyptian-German Team had checked the parallels of several stylistic and iconographic features, there can be little doubt that the colossal statue is really dated to the 7th-century B.C. This was not that easy since the face of the sculpture itself was missing.
"With this date, one can reconstruct now the cultural context of the statue within the reign of Psamtek I (664–610 B.C.). This very successful king of Egypt is comparatively little-known. He managed to lead Egypt to independence after many years of war. During this time the country was the stage for fierce battles between armies of the Kushite and Assyrian realms. In modern topographical terms, Sudan and Iraq fought for decades for hegemony over Egypt.

"In his second decade of rule, and relying on well-trained military contingents from Greece, Psamtek I restored Egypt's independence. The idea of an Egyptian Renaissance was pushed forward and, in this context, Psamtek returned to the traditional place for legitimating Egypt's kingship: Heliopolis. Here he chose a monumental stage, since he erected his colossal statue in front of a large sanctuary built by Ramesses II. By starting again to commission colossal statuary after 600 years without such sculptures, Psamtek I strove to connect his reign to the 'glory days' of Egypt's great empire.

"It's worth noting that the Greek soldiers were mercenaries, i.e. they returned home after the job they were paid for was done. There is growing evidence that the impetus for erecting statues in sanctuaries came from this cultural contact with Egypt. In this scenario, it is very interesting that the Greeks not only saw statues from Egypt's legendary past, but also contemporary statuary of their commander-in-chief, Pharaoh Psamtek."

Dr. Raue calls Heliopolis "...a big puzzle where 99% is missing." Occasional excavations over the last century have yielded intriguing, but fragmentary finds. "There are very rarely any blocks still in position," Dr. Raue explains, "This is due to the medieval use of Heliopolis as a quarry for the fortifications of Cairo. It is important to realise that there is no intact temple to be recovered or to be restored in place. But there are still important fragments of the once splendid complex of sanctuaries to be found, like our find of the fragments of the colossus of Psamtek I."

Just like the temple complex of Amun at Karnak, the early temples at Heliopolis were enlarged, enhanced and sometimes replaced. Even fragmentary discoveries can help augment the story of royal devotion at Heliopolis through the centuries. Deitrich Raue: "Inscriptions from Heliopolis tell us that there is a continuous investment of the state from about 2650–350 B.C.; i.e. building activity of the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms, as well as the Late Period. Evidence even points to an important occupation of the area in the later 4th-millennium B.C."

"Every season helps us to see aspects of continuity, but also breaks in tradition. The last two seasons taught us, for example, how the temple of Heliopolis was used by both Ramesside dynasties as a major stage of their representation—especially with their concern of getting..."
the support of the creator sun-god. Another part of the research focusses on the end of the temple activity. It is as interesting as it is confusing, that Egypt’s rulers lost interest in this sanctuary long before Rome’s Christian emperors called for the closure of the pagan sanctuaries."

Dr. Dietrich Raue has held a long fascination with Heliopolis. He wrote his PhD dissertation about Heliopolis in the New Kingdom and realised in the process that archaeologically, the site was very badly documented. He hosted one season of digging in 2005 and returned in 2012 with a newly-created joint Egyptian-German mission with Dr. Aiman Ashmawy. Since 2015 the University of Applied Sciences Mainz, Germany with Prof. Dr. Phil Kai-Christian Bruhn has been the third partner with their know-how in 3D technology and Geographical Information Systems (GIS).

The Heliopolis Project team knew that the central Atum Temple was close to the still-standing obelisk of Senusret I. (It was from here that a number of objects were brought in the Greco-Roman period to Alexandria and Rome.) Heading west from the obelisk, a grand processional avenue, lined with sphinxes, ran to the main gateway on the western side of the precinct. It is this western periphery, south of the processional axis, that has rarely been investigated.

Drs. Raue and Ashmawy explain the main findings from the last seven seasons:

"We have uncovered the vestiges of various 'minor' temples along the main processional avenue that led to the obelisk. On the western end (Area 200) is the temple of Ramesses II, discovered in 2005, who usurped statuary from the Middle Kingdom (at least four red granite statues of Senusret I), as well as talatat blocks, which suggests that Ramesses II replaced a sanctuary of Akhenaten with his own temple. This testifies for the continuity of the solar cult at Heliopolis even in the Amarna period (see page 22). In this ambiente [atmosphere], surrounded by centuries-old statues and reliefs of Ramesses II, Psamtek erected his colossal statue.

"The second temple on the way to the obelisk is another commissioned by Ramesses II, this time for Amun and Mut (Area 248). Blocks from the temple were first located south of the Matariya Youth Club which has been recently built across the processional avenue leading to the central temple of Atum. In what is thought to be the offering hall before the temple's cult chapels were found reliefs of Ramesses II anointing a deity [page 24].

"The third temple along the axis was discovered in April 2016 (Area 221). It was also begun in the time of Ramesses II and was enlarged or restored 800 years later by the 30th-Dynasty’s Nectanebo I (380–362 b.c.). About 70 cm below the water table a number of inscribed basalt slabs were discovered featuring a geographic procession of the nomes of Egypt. The inscriptions are mainly March 2017. The biggest discovery to date. This colossal quartzite torso of King Psamtek I (ca. 664–610 b.c.) was discovered at the western end of the archaeological zone, known as Suq el-Khamis (Area 200), close to modern residential buildings. One other fragment was found: the partly preserved crown and head of the statue. Dietrich Raue explains the uniqueness of the find: "It is the first statue of this size ever found for the period between 1200 and 300 B.C. There are accounts of Herodotus describing similar statues in the temple of Memphis by Psamtek I, but as of yet, our statue is the first one that can be archaeologically verified."
adressed to Atum, Lord of Heliopolis, but also mention the Heliopolitan Hathor, mistress of Hetepet (see page 22). “But there must have been many more buildings,” Dr. Raue says, “We know by other inscriptions that there was a House of Millions of Years of Ramesses II’s successor, Merenptah, and of Ramesses III. A temple of Horus must also have been somewhere in this precinct.”

Due to rapid urban development the work at Heliopolis has often been driven by the urgency of rescue archaeology. “Matariya is a densely inhabited part of northeastern Cairo,” says Dr. Raue, “The economic situation for many of the people there is difficult, and in 2013 it was the site of political clashes. The situation is stable now, but the months of weak central authority over the area led to illicit garbage disposal in the archaeological area and to considerable encroachment. Some illegally-built houses were removed in 2015, but in total, several hectares of uninvestigated temple area were lost.

“The encroachment and the garbage dumps (piled to a height of up to 13 metres) have caused severe problems for the project. The location of most monuments under the subsoil water level does not allow for management of the finds in situ.

“All this means that it takes a highly motivated and enthusiastic team to cover difficult issues like working during late summer months in the middle of the dump. I am very glad that our Egyptian-German team harmonises perfectly and has been able to cover the growing number of rescue excavations.”

So what’s next for the Heliopolis Project? “We will get back to the temple of Nectanebo I because we have not yet yielded all of the blocks of two impressive sandstone gates that were discovered in 2015. Several stones found so far are decorated with depictions of Atum and the Nectanebo I offering to the god.

“In addition, we have started investigations closer to the obelisk to try to get an idea about the plan of the innermost part of the cult of the sun at Heliopolis. For the future, we hope that we can support the plans of the ministry to reopen the Open-Air Museum of Matariya. This would be an important step in promoting cultural awareness among the people in this quarter of Cairo, especially among the young people.”

Forget the idea of a couple of archaeologists scraping away out in the desert; excavations are big collaborative, multidisciplinary efforts. Dr. Raue explains what it takes to make the Heliopolis Project happen each season: “The Egyptian-German Mission has the full support of the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities, and its Minister, Dr. Khaled El-Enany. He supported the mission during the extraction of the fragments of the statue of Psamtek I by experts from the Grand Egyptian Museum and the Egyptian Museum at Tahrir. Every season, about 15 Egyptian archaeologists and restorers, headed by the director of...
The westernmost Ramesses II temple (Area 200) made liberal use of talatat blocks and suggests that, as Zahi Hawass writes, “Akhenaten did not... abandon the rest of the country and retire exclusively to Akhetaten... there were temples to the Aten in Memphis and Heliopolis.” The lower block in this photo, reused by Ramesses II, bears the life-giving rays of the god Aten.

Matariya Antiquities, Khaled Abu Al-Ela, work with students from Leipzig University and specialists from The Netherlands, Belgium, France and Poland. The Outdoor Museum at the obelisk, directed by Hoda Kamal Ahmed, and the department of restorers from Matariya inspectorate, headed by Mme Iman Riad, support our team every season with her colleagues.

“Funding has been granted by the German Research Foundation (DFG), along with help from the German Embassy in Cairo and organisations like the Schiff Giorgini Foundation, the European Foundation for Culture and Education of the Rahn Dittrich Group, the Berthold Leibinger Foundation, the Gerda Henkel Foundation, the Greiss Foundation in Cologne, and the Mehen Foundation in Leiden.

“In addition, the constantly growing amount of work can only be covered because of numerous private donations. This all allows us to employ about 25 specialised workmen from Quft who have worked in excavations for up to six generations. Up to 100 local people—women and men—from Matariya are working there too, by removing the excavation debris.

“If readers of NILE Magazine are interested in helping us in our work, donations help and every cent counts!”

You can help support the good work in Heliopolis and stay up-to-date with the latest discoveries by visiting heliopolisproject.org and heliopolisspenden.jimdo.com.
The hardworking Heliopolis Project Team at Area 232: the southeastern fringe of the innermost part of the temple precinct. It was probably in this area that, in 1907, the Missione Archeologica Italiana excavations discovered the fragments of the naos of king Djoser (one fragment is shown on page 18). Area 232 has only recently become available for archaeological examination; up until 2015 the area housed an Egyptian army camp.

Nectanebo I (ca. 380–362 B.C.) was the founder of Egypt’s last native dynasty—the 30th—and was a great builder and restorer to an extent not seen in Egypt for centuries. His Heliopolis temple (Area 221) was constructed on the site of an earlier one belonging to Ramesses II. The Heliopolis Project has uncovered limestone reliefs (above) and columns, and lower wall zones made of black basalt. At the time of the discovery in April 22016, Dietrich Raue reported that “This fits the growing evidence of the enormous activities of 30th dynasty kings in this sanctuary.”
Although Ramesses II’s grandson, King Seti II, reigned for just six short years (ca. 1200–1194 B.C.), he clearly prioritised establishing a regal presence at Heliopolis. The desire to share in the benben’s powers of creation would be a strong pull. This limestone statue of Seti II was found earlier this year near the colossal statue of Psamtek I in the ruined forecourt of Ramesses II’s westernmost temple (Area 200).

In September 2016 the Egyptian-German mission at Heliopolis announced the discovery of the first evidence of a new temple belonging to Ramesses II. The mission had unearthed a number of blocks from the temple courtyards and sanctuary, along with fragments of the temple statuary. At the time, Dr. Ayman Ashmawi said that the find “confirms the hypothesis that Ramesses II showed special interest in Heliopolis in the later decades of his long reign of almost 70 years.”

This block, showing Ramesses II anointing a deity with fragrant oil, using the little finger of his right hand, was determined to be from the temple’s innermost rooms, privy to only the highest priests and the king himself. The block features an incredibly rare variant of the king’s birth name, “Paramessu-Meriamun.”