

EGYPT

Monuments, historic ensembles and cultural landscapes in Egypt are critically endangered. This applies to the sites on UNESCO's World Heritage List, as well as to the great number of monuments from prehistoric, Pharaonic, Christian and Islamic times. Due to an expansion of tourism into the desert and to large-scale irrigation projects, the many witnesses of early history – which very often have been neither documented nor studied – are at risk of being destroyed.

Abu Mina – World Heritage Site

A few years ago this 5th-century place of pilgrimage, consecrated to St. Menas, lay on the edge of the Libyan Desert. It is a spacious complex of buildings consisting of a large basilica, a crypt, a baptistery and several pilgrimage sites. Because of a rigorous expansion of the cultivated areas, combined with intensive irrigation, this important early Christian site is no longer situated in the desert but has become a 'historic island' in the middle of tomato fields. Due to permanent irrigation the layers of clayish soil immediately underneath the surface have become sodden and have eroded or washed out. The cavities that this erosion has created are now falling in, and large parts of the former town of Menas are either threatened by collapse or have already collapsed. The crypt, which was the starting point of this pilgrimage cult, has only been provisionally filled with sand; as a consequence it is just a matter of time before large parts of the structure will fall in here, as well as in the basilica. Only an immediate end to irrigation, which would lead to the gradual sinking of the groundwater level, as well as scientific investigations to prepare a restoration concept, could save this World Heritage site from destruction.

The Hibis Temple in the El-Charga Oasis

During the Saite period a temple was built in the centre of the oasis capital of Hibis, by the shore of a 750 metre-long lake. It was probably constructed during the reign of Darius I (521–486 BC), to honour the main god Amun. Problems occurred with the

foundations during the construction of the temple, so that the western wall had to be re-erected at that time. The temple was subsequently abandoned as a place of worship and was destroyed by earthquakes; it was excavated and restored at the beginning of the 20th century.

At present the temple is facing deterioration due to rising dampness discovered in the 1980s, which has caused further damage. It is feared that this deterioration will lead to a considerable loss of original building fabric.

Luxor, Western and Eastern Thebes – World Heritage Sites

Due to rising dampness and an increase in the number of tourists, many monuments of this important cultural site show considerable damage. All major temples, as well as a great number of tombs, have already been seriously harmed. Bacterial infestation is noticeable on the painted surfaces of several tombs, particularly the workers' tombs in Der el-Medina. A good example of the current threats to wall reliefs is the temple of Ramses III in Medinet Habu, where an extensive part of the relief on the south-west wall of the pylon, showing the king hunting, has already been lost because of efflorescence.

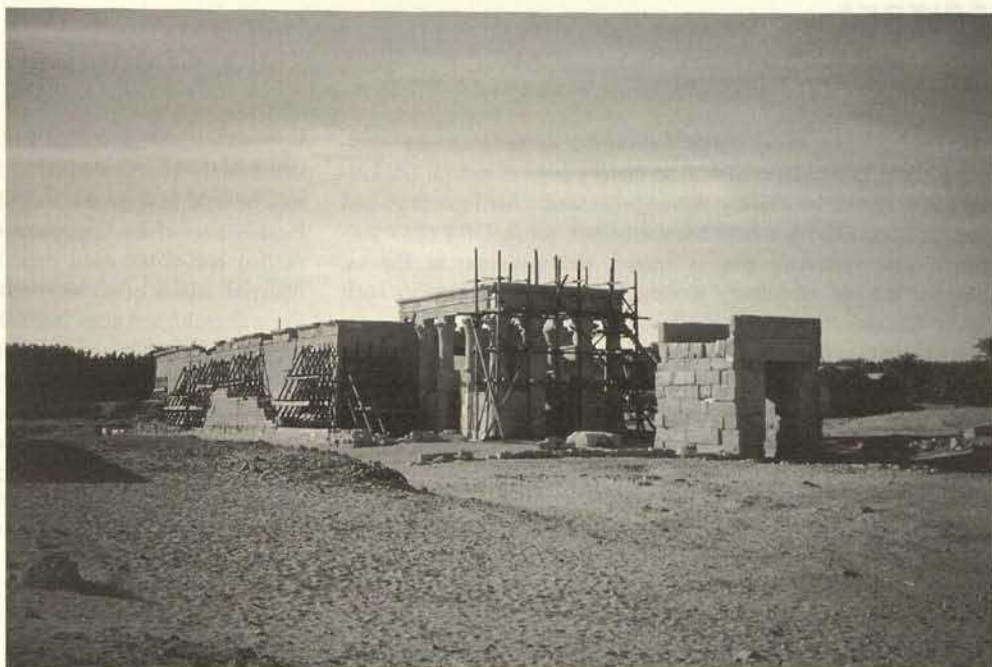
This kind of destruction can be seen on all lower parts of the temple walls in Luxor, which are situated only a few metres or sometimes centimetres above the current Nile water-level. Through the rise of the groundwater level in the Nile valley – from Aswan to the Delta – the fabric of nearly all temple complexes and archaeological sites is severely affected by rising dampness, as well as by irrigation for land reclamation. In addition to these problems, a lack of maintenance is leading to a further loss of historic substance. Considering the enormous number of monuments from over 5000 years of cultural history (plus other problems due to its state as a threshold land), it is asking too much to expect Egypt (or any other country in a similar situation) to take care of the conservation of its cultural heritage without assistance from outside sources.



Abu Mina, The Great Basilica in 2001, extensive plant growth due to high groundwater level

FINLAND Protecting Cultural

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Hibis Temple, total view in 2000



El-Charga Oasis, Hibis Temple, northern wall with ancient crack, mortar from the restoration of 1910-12

Luxor, Temple of Ramses III, Medinet Habu, damages in the first pylon

Medinet Habu, sculptural additions

