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Beheaded, Burnt and Buried: A Deposit of Royal Statue Fragments in the Temple of Heliopolis

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Head of a 13th dynasty sphinx, in context and frontal view
(Photo S. Connor © Egyptian-German mission at Heliopolis)

In 2022, two successive excavation campaigns by the Egyptian-German mission, led by Dietrich Raue and Aiman Ashmawy, focused on the area surrounding the museum of Matariya, which collects the monumental pieces discovered on the archaeological site of Heliopolis around the obelisk of Senusret I. These excavations unearthed the massive limestone block foundations of a Late Period temple, as well as a limestone pavement that once covered the temple forecourt. A preserved part of this pavement to the south of the obelisk of Senusret I revealed a deposit of fragments of statues and cult objects from the Middle and New Kingdoms, buried in the Late Period. The fragments belong almost exclusively to the heads of sphinxes, which seem to have been ritually broken and burnt before being buried, perhaps reflecting a practice of deactivating the statues accompanying their decapitation before the reuse of their bodies.