Kom Ombo and the Temple of Sobek and Haroeris
by Mark Andrews

Kom Ombo stands on a promontory at a bend in the Nile, at the north end of the largest area of agricultural land south of Gebel el-Silsila, between Aswan and Edfu. Situated on a plateau cut by two long dry streams which isolated the site, it provides one of the most spectacular settings of any of Egypt's river temples. The temple was located in the ancient city of Pa-Sebek, "the Domain of Sobek", who was the crocodile god worshipped since the Predynastic Period.
The Kom Ombo basin has significance in the Nile Valley archaeology of the Late (Upper) Paleolithic (c. 15,000-12,000 BC). In the 1920s, Edmun Vignard identified and excavated prehistoric sites having a stone working industry he named Sebilian. Vignard's work has been revised by that of P. E. L. Smith and Fekri Hassan, who have also identified two other industries in the region, Silsillian and Sebekian, which appear to have coexisted with the Sebilian.
Little is known of the town during the Dynastic Period, and there has actually been little excavation of the ancient site beyond the clearance of the temple. Changes in agricultural techniques brought the city to prominence in the Ptolemaic Period, to which almost all the visible monuments date. An 18th Dynasty gateway was, however, seen by Champollion in the south enclosure wall, and scattered New Kingdom blocks have been found on the site. Hence, there is believed to have been a New Kingdom predecessor to the Greek and Roman structure. However, part of the temple forecourt has been eroded by the river, which may also have carried off other features (though modern control of the river has checked the threat of further damage). The mound behind the enclosure contains shards of the First Intermediate Period, showing that the site is far more ancient than the sacred enclosure, which is all that has been explored.

In later times, Kom Ombo was situated at the terminus of two caravan routes, one running westward through the Kurkur Oasis to Tomas in Nubia, while the other ran from Daraw through the Eastern Desert, regaining the Nile at Berber. Those routes were regularly used during early modern times, although how old they are is uncertain.
The earliest king named in the temple at Kom Ombo is Ptolemy VI Philometor, though most of the decoration was completed by Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos. In the early Roman Period, the forecourt was decorated and the outer corridor added.

The structure is built of local sandstone from Gebel el-Silsila. Apparently, troops stationed at Kom Ombo (it was a training ground for African elephants used by the army during the Ptolemaic Period) built much of the temple. The use of elephants was actually a Ptolemaic innovation, as was the use of camels in Egypt.
Although the layout of the temple is similar to that of Dendera or Edfu, it is somewhat smaller and has a very pleasing architectural elegance based on the careful planning of its architects. The temple is oriented east to west according to the "local north" determined by the river, and today the temple is entered through the remains of the Ptolemaic portal at the southwest of the precinct.

The main temple at Kom Ombo, originally cleared of debris by Jacques de Morgan in 1893, is dedicated to two triads of deities. One set consists of Sobek, Hathor and their child Khonsu, while the other consists of Haroeris (Harwer-equated with Apollo, or Horus the Elder), Tasenetnofret (the Perfect Companion) and their child Panebtawy (the Lord of the Two Lands). The last two have artificial names that express the goddess's function in such a group as a "consort," and the young god's to be kingly. Of course, the two most important gods were Sobek, whose part of the temple is on the south and Horus the Elder, whose part of the temple is on the north, to which the temple was dedicated equally. This was why the temple was called both "House of the Crocodile" and "Castle of the Falcon".
Overall, the relief sculpture is typical of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, with very deeply carved sunken reliefs on the exterior walls and columns, and fine quality bas-relief on the interior walls. Much of the relief is covered with a very thin layer of plaster, and the original color survives in many places. The decorations of the inner rooms depict Ptolemy VI and Cleopatra II, and Ptolemy VII with Cleopatra II and Cleopatra III.

The birth house, nearest to the river, has lost its western half, so little of it remains. However, the architects of Napoleon's expedition did find preserved the four Hathor columns and considerable parts of the walls of the birth house, with their splendid relief of Ptolemy VIII. The building measured 18 by 23 meters and was nine meters high. The plan was that of an ordinary temple with a room for visiting gods, an offering hall and a sanctuary that was laterally isolated. The platform commonly found at birth houses existed, but the equally typical ambulatory, which was included in the birth houses of Ptolemy VIII at Philae and Edfu, was apparently omitted. Therefore, it more closely resembled birth houses of the 30th Dynasty. The birth house abuts closely on the pylon of the main temple, perhaps because space was short in antiquity (the temple's rear is similarly cramped against the enclosure wall). Like
elsewhere, the birth house is situated right of, and at a right angle to the main temple. It sits very near the gate of Ptolemy XII "Auletes", the "flute player".

The small Roman Period shrine of Hathor east of the courtyard long stored the mummies of sacred crocodiles from a nearby necropolis, as they are today in clay coffins. There is also a well west of the temple which is complex in design and, because of the temple’s elevation above the river, very deep. Like other wells in temple enclosures, it allowed pure water, in theory from the primeval waters themselves, to be drawn within the sacred area, avoiding pollution from the outside world. Near the well is also a small pond where live crocodiles are believed to have been raised.

From the first hypostyle hall runs a corridor that encloses the entire inner part of the temple and contains a number of small chambers at the back. This is enclosed in turn by a second, three meter thick wall and corridor that take in the courtyard. Thus the double axis goes together with other dual features.
The pylon entrance in the outer enclosure wall to the main temple had a double gateway, 14.5 meters wide and approximately 15.75 meters high, that is the first sign of a complex plan with an axis for each main gateway. This impressive structure could be climbed through a staircase in the west wall. However, all that is left of the great entrance pylon is the right hand part, where the Roman emperor Domitian can be seen with various gods rendering homage to the triad of Sobek, Hathor and Khonsu, together with a long text of 52 lines in hieroglyphics.
The whole temple reflects its dual ownership, and even the Roman forecourt built by Augustus within the pylon was divided into equal shares for Sobek (east side) and Horus the Elder. In fact, an altar base is situated in the court's center with small basins, meant to receive libations, sunk into the ground at each side for the respective gods. The court was surrounded in the south, west and north by colonnades (sixteen total columns). The western colonnade was divided into two by the double gate. The north and south colonnades ended before reaching the hypostyle hall. The relief carvings on some of the surviving columns of the colonnade along the forecourt's sides are well preserved and many maintain their original coloring. Many depict images of the Roman emperor Tiberius.

Beyond the forecourt, the facade of the hypostyle hall built by Ptolemy XII, with its intercolumnar screen walls and small side doors for use by the priests, is typical of its period. On either side of the doors, Ptolemy XII Neo Dionysos is shown purified by Horus, Thoth and Haroeris.
Tour Egypt

(in the part on the left) and by Horus, Thoth and Sobek on the right. The capitals of the columns within, arranged in two rows of five free standing columns, are often wrought with ingenious compound forms. As would be expected, the decoration of the hall and remaining parts of the temple is divided between the two gods, with scenes of Sobek on the east and Haroeris on the west. The ceiling is decorated with astronomical scenes, with the vulture, the symbol of Nekhbet and Wadjet. The column shafts are all carved with reliefs: above with a band of hieroglyphs with the symbol of life (ankh) and below with the pharaoh rendering homage to the various gods. Some reliefs in the first hypostyle hall use the ancient technique of inlaying the eyes of the most important figures. The inlays, which must have given a special opulence and liveliness to the figure, are now lost, as they are on almost all ancient works that had this detail.

A second hypostyle hall beyond the first repeats its design on a smaller scale and again allows two separate processional paths towards the inner sanctuaries behind the three narrow transverse halls or vestibules. The staircases to the roof were located at either end of the second hall. Similar to the arrangement at Edfu, the northern staircase was right-angled, while the southern one was straight. The drainage system of the roof included lion-headed water spouts.
Beyond the second hypostyle hall, side rooms branched off to either side of the first broad room and probably served for the production of ointments and other offerings. In these broad chambers there are scenes illustrating the goddess Seshat launching the building of the temple. There is also a scene of the completed temple with the king throwing natron (carbonate salt used in mummifying) in a purification ceremony. These chambers were built by Ptolemy VI, Philometer. Also in these rooms is a calendar recording important festival dates.

The twin sanctuaries, like much of the temple's interior, are broken down but still contain the black granite pedestals which supported the sacred barques of the two gods. Because the pedestals left no room for wooden statue shrines, the statues must have been housed in the barques or in the chambers behind the bark shrines. The reduced condition of the sanctuary chambers reveals the secret chamber beneath them which was used by priests to overhear petitions or deliver oracles on behalf of the deities. In fact, much of the inner part of the temple is honeycombed with crypts, some on three levels, and hidden passages, and many of these can be explored by visitors to the temple.

As at Dendera and Edfu, the sanctuary rooms are surrounded by smaller cult chapels (a total of ten), but unlike the other two sites, a small, internal hallway runs around the perimeter of the inner temple, between it and the outer wall of the building. The back wall of this area has six small rooms, three on either side of a stairwell leading to the roof, with varying degrees of decoration. The outer ambulatory which encircles this area, as at Edfu, is decorated with Roman period scenes of varying quality. Numerous reliefs in the inner corridor and its small rooms are unfinished, giving valuable insight into artists' methods during the Greco-Roman Period. Notably, among them, towards the left end of the rear wall, is the famous and controversial scene in which the king (Trajan) presents a group of ritual and/or surgical instruments. Some of these implements were certainly used in the practice of the cult, but other may very well be medically related. Furthermore, it is known that pilgrims came to Haroeris, Horus the Elder, who was also known as the healer, to be treated for their infirmities. They apparently waited on the god in the temple's hallways where game boards were scratched into the stones of the floor.
The most striking feature of the rear part of the temple is the false door at the center of the back, outside wall of the sanctuary area, which is here modified and expanded in form to include a central niche flanked by hearing ears and seeing eyes and the figures of the two gods. Here we find Sobek, on the left, with a lion-headed scepter or baton, and Haroeris, on the right, with a strange human-legged knife. Between the two gods a double hymn extols them, and above the niche, along with the figure of Nut who holds up the sky, the figures of the four winds are represented by a lion, a falcon, a bull and a many-headed serpent. This oddly echoes the later Christian use of the ancient images of lion, eagle, bull and man as symbols of the four Gospel writers.
The outer surfaces of the temple enclosure walls are decorated with colossal relief, predictably divided in the subject of their representations between the realms of the two gods. This work was completed by Nero and Vespasian.

Much of the temple has only recently been restored. Also, a new museum is also scheduled to be inaugurated that will display mummified crocodiles.

References:
Art of Ancient Egypt, The

Robins, Gay

1997

Harvard University Press

ISBN 0-674-00376-4

Atlas of Ancient Egypt

Baines, John; Malek, Jaromír

1980

Les Livres De France

None Stated

Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt, The