The Temple of Seti I and the Osireion at Abydos

by Peter Rome

The Main Temple

The temple that the Greeks called the Memnonium in Abydos, actually dedicated to Seti I, Osiris and Isis along with Ptah, Ptah-Sokar, Nefertem, Re-Horakhty, Amun, and Horus, is one of the major archaeological sites in that region. It was begun by Seti I and finished by
his son, the great Ramesses II. In fact, this structure built of fine white limestone is actually one of the most impressive religious structures in Egypt.

The present facade of the Temple was once the backdrop to the second of the two courtyards, the first of which, along with its entrance pylon, have long since fallen into ruin.

The temple, in the shape of an L, once had a landing quay, a ramp, a front terrace, two pylons, though the outer one is mostly lost, with two courts and pillared porticoes, followed by two hypostyle halls and seven chapels, with additional chambers to the south making up the short leg of the L. Storage chambers fill the area from the southern wing to the front of the temple. The main body of the temple was symmetrical back to the seven chapels. While the L shaped floor plan of this temple is unusual, analysis seems to show that the southern wing was no afterthought, but the result of a well thought out alternative to the usual axial temple plan.
Ground Plan of the Main Seti I Temple at Abydos
One approaches the temple through its outer courts, now ruined but with the huge tanks for the absolution of the temple’s priest still visible. This was the first temple we know of in Egypt that incorporated these structures. Along the way there are also row upon row of mud brick storage annexes grouped around a stone entrance hall. The access to the temple proper is up a long flight of 42 shallow stairs.

Here, the outer pylons and courts, as well as the first hypostyle hall which is relatively shallow and has two rows of twelve columns with lotus bud capitals, were hastily completed and decorated by Ramesses II. In fact, an image of him worshiping his father, along with Osiris and Isis is incorporated into the initial decorations. Most of the decorations completed by Ramesses II are inferior to those done during his father's reign, but some are interesting and noteworthy, including the depiction of him as a young boy roping a bull with his father (elsewhere in the temple). Here, we also find a number of military scenes (second courtyard). Within the first hypostyle hall, it is interesting that Ramesses II placed decorations over those of his father. Within the portico that leads to the hypostyle halls, there was once seven doors that gave way to seven processional paths through the towering clustered columns to seven chapels at the rear of the temple.
Seti wearing a blue crown to emphasize his military prowess, burns incense over an offering

However, when Ramesses II added the outer sections of the temple, most of these doorways were filled in. Therefore, the second hypostyle hall with its 36 squat columns that are carefully aligned to give access to the chapels, became their vestibule. The first two of the three rows of columns have lotus bud capitals, while the last row is without capitals, but sits upon a high platform. The carved reliefs in this part of the temple were completed during the reign of Seti I, are some of the finest to be found in any Egyptian temple. The quality of this artwork extends beyond the careful depiction of major figures within the scenes to even the smallest details of minor items and hieroglyphs. We find scenes depicting Seti before various gods, performing sacrifices and presenting the image of Ma'at. Most of the scenes are very formal, but on the right wall, they are striking. Here, we find a scene of Seti I before Osiris, holding a censer and pouring a libation from a flower-bedecked triple ewer. In the next scene we find Seti before the enthroned Osiris in the presence of Ma'at and Renpit. Behind stand Isis, Amentet, goddess of the west, and an ennead of other funerary deities. There is also depicted an ornate djed symbol.
From south to north, (left to right), the seven sanctuaries at the rear of the temple were dedicated to Seti I, Ptah, Re-Horakhty, Amun, Osiris, Isis and Horus, and the statues of each god were almost certainly situated in their respective chambers. Each chapel is decorated with rituals associated with various festivals related to these gods. Actually these scenes are fairly similar to each other, with mostly only the god changing from room to room, though this is not always the case.

In the chapel dedicated to Seti I, starting from the left, Seti is borne into the sanctuary, preceded by a sem-priest wearing the panther skin. Next, the king is brought into the presence of the gods who acknowledge and bless him. Here, Seshat, the consort of Thoth, wearing her seven-petaled headdress, writes the king's name for eternity.
The Osiris chapel is devoted almost exclusively to the different forms of that god, each distinguished by a different headdress, as well as by different ceremonial costumes and equipment. Thus, the chapel summarizes the many forms and functions of Osiris. Specifically because of the meticulousness with which these reliefs were rendered, it is a fine study of details such as the variety of headdresses.

Each chapel is roofed over with corbeling slabs cut as flat vaults, which were decorated with stars and the royal cartouches. While six of the chambers had double false doors on their rear walls, that of Osiris had a real door that gave way to a suite of rooms, dedicated to him, just behind the seven chapels. This doorway first communicated with the largest room of the suite, a transverse hall with two rows of five columns without capitals. It was decorated with various scenes of Seti I making offerings to Osiris. Here, ceremonies related to the resurrection of Osiris in the form of Horus are also depicted. Everywhere within this room are symbolisms of resurrection and rebirth, including scenes of Isis offering eggs, an offering made to the Benu bird and a depiction of the Egyptian phoenix. On the rear wall we find a scene depicting offerings made to Hequet, the Frog, who symbolized the multiplicity of creation.
However, on its more or less northern wall are found three more chapels dedicated to Horus, Seti I and Isis, in that order from front to back. The walls in these chambers are also highly decorated. For example, in the Horus shrine there is a depiction of the falcon-headed vulture carrying the shen sign of eternity. Behind these small chapels was a hidden chamber with two columns where the temple's major treasures were probably kept. On the opposite (southern) end of the Osiris suite was a four column chamber where, on its southern wall, were located three additional chapels. The decorations in this four pillar room include a depiction of Seti I with two right hands making an offering of a statue of himself, which in turn is making an offering. In another scene we find that the king is being offered a djed column with an ankh, the symbol of life. Here, he is depicted with two left hands.
However, the rear of the chapel forms an L-shape with additional chambers to the south connected by a narrow hallway leading from the second hypostyle hall. No doubt one of the most important, at least for Egyptologists, scenes within the temple is located here, for upon the walls of this passage are inscribed one of the few surviving Egyptian king lists. In fact, this is often referred to as the "King's Hallway", or "King's Gallery". The list begins with Menes and ends with Seti I, but classically omits certain undesirable kings such as those of the Amarna Period. There are a total of 76 pharaohs listed with some notable exceptions being Akhenaten, Hatshepsut, Ay and
Horemheb

The list probably served the cult of the royal ancestors, but why this important list was placed in a seemingly minor hallway is unknown. On the left hand wall of this passage the king and the young Ramesses II (probably) pour a libation on an alter, and an inscription names the list of shrines and gods being honored.

After making a right hand turn in this passage, we find on the right hand wall the famous scene of the young Ramesses II and his father roping a bull. Further on the animal is offered as a sacrifice. On the left hand wall the king (Ramesses II), who decorated this room) is depicted offering four oxen to Khonsu and to Seti I. There is also a scene of Ramesses II and Set I trapping and then offering geese to Amun. From here, the passage continues out to the Osireion.

However, rather than making the right hand turn in the passage, one may proceed straight into
the remainder of the unfinished southern wing of the temple. Here, we find cult chapels dedicated to the Memphite gods, Ptah-Sokar and Nefertem, who were the northern counterparts of Osiris. There was also a chamber where the barques (boats) of the temple's gods were kept, along with various service and storage annexes including a slaughter court bordered on three sides by a portico with seven columns. The drainage system in this room is proof that the animals were actually sacrificed here, as shown in its wall scenes.

The Osireion

Passage leading from the Temple to the Osireion

Taking the right hand passage from the Temple's southern wing leads to the temple's cenotaph (false tomb) that was located some 15 meters lower. The top of this structure is actually below ground level. This is the almost unique structure that today we refer to as the Osireion. It has been suggested that the architecture of the Osireion was inspired by the Valley Temple and causeway of Khafre at Giza, which by the New Kingdom was buried underground but was
still accessible and known to the Egyptians as a tomb or shrine of Osiris. It is carefully aligned with the temple proper, and enclosed within a mud brick wall integrated into the outside storage magazines that are nested within the cavity left by the main temple's L-shaped configuration. In effect, the main temple acts as a mortuary temple to this false tomb. Hence, no discussion of the temple proper would be complete without covering the Osireion as well.

**Monolithic blocks of the Osireion**

The structure was built in an excavation in the sandy clay stratum of the desert, with almost vertical sides. Two parallel limestone walls running over the eastern room of the structure served as retaining walls for the sand bed upon which the temple was built. The foundations is cut many feet below the current level of the water table.
While this structure was built by Seti I, it was his grandson, Merenptah, who was responsible for its decorative theme. A much more simple structure than the main temple, a long passage, with its limestone pent roof, decorated with scenes and text from the Book of Gates and the Amduat leads through the mud brick enclosure wall at the northwest side of the complex. At a wide point in the passage, it makes a sharp left turn before leading into a long, transverse hall that has a corbel roof cut in the shape of a pent roof beneath. This in turn leads to a monumental hall. While this hall was only partially roofed around its sides with an ambulatory, it is not unlike the massively pillared chambers of the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Measuring 30 x 20 meters, it is made from granite and appears anachronistic, though well suited to its purpose.
A rectangular island in the center of this hall had receptacles carved into its floor to receive a sarcophagus and canopic chest. Upon the island were built massive pillars made of five Aswan rose colored granite monoliths about 2.4 meters square by a little over 3.5 meters high and weighing, on average, around 100 tons, to support the ambulatory atop the equally massive architraves. There is some evidence that the structure may have originally been completely roofed with monolithic slabs. A channel about three meters across then surrounds this island. It contained water and thus the interior of this structure was symbolic of the primeval waters of creation from which an island arose. At either end of the island stairways lead down into the water channel about 3.5 meters. The outside walls of the structure, made of red sandstone some six meters thick, contain six unfinished niches on each of the room's long sides, three more on the wall facing Seti I's temple, and three more on the opposite wall. Around those were a ledge forming the outer edge of the water channel.
The transverse halls nearest Seti I's temple was also built of limestone with a corbeled roof of sandstone cut in the shape of a pent roof. Its decorations consisting of astronomical and funerary text stood at either end of the main hall. Other scenes included a depiction of the sky goddess, Nut, which was commissioned during the actual reign of Seti I rather than his grandson. Hence, the structure incorporates many of the elements of New Kingdom royal tombs. The Osireion is perhaps the most conspicuous example of religious symbolism in Egyptian architecture.

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