

Essex Egyptology Group: 1 December 2024: **Prof. Rosalie David: Religious Ritual in the Temple of Seti I at Abydos: Analysing the wall-scenes and decoration.**



Image courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society

Professor David began her talk by mentioning that the subject had been given to her as a PhD topic by Professor Fairman at the University of Liverpool. This involved investigating whether or not this Abydos Temple of Seti I functioned as a unit, and if its wall themes were purely decorative or had a specific ritual use.

The temple was mostly built by Seti I circa 1300 BCE on a site dating back to the Old Kingdom. It aimed to reaffirm religious orthodoxy after the Amarna period as well as to legitimise Seti's right to rule as king.

The finest quality raised reliefs were completed during Seti's reign, but others were finished by his son, Rameses II, and were crudely carved by comparison. Some work was finalised by Merenptah.

Symbolism of Temple

Egyptian temples symbolise the 'Island of Creation'. The first ones were simple reed and mudbrick hut-shrines with arched roofs that provided a sanctuary for demi-gods on the island.

In front of the entrance was an enclosure wall with flagstaffs. Over time, temples evolved into increasingly complex structures built of stone. The fullest account of this creation myth is recorded at Edfu Temple. Temple floor levels gradually increased to represent the island mound, whereas roof levels decreased towards the sanctuary for greater and exclusive intimacy. Carved stone columns represent plants on the Island of Creation. The temple aimed to be a return to the original golden state of creation. The 'House of the god', the Hwt-nTr, was a place where the king met with the gods.

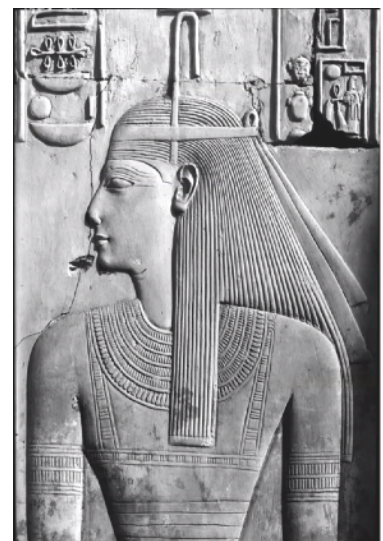


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Temple Plan

Seti's temple plan is L-shaped, rather than the usual rectangular shape. This is most likely due to a previously existing structure - the Osireion - behind it.

The temple comprises a First Court, a Second Court, a First then Second Hypostyle Hall, seven dedicated sanctuary chapels, two Inner Osiris Halls, a closed room, a Hall of Nefertem-Ptah-Sokar, the Hall of the Barques and a number of service and storerooms. A corridor linking the Second Hypostyle Hall with the Butcher's Hall features the Abydos Kings Lists.



Image courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society

Six shrines are dedicated to the northern gods. One chapel is dedicated to the cult of Seti.

At the back of the temple, the Osiris complex - a set of rooms unique to Abydos (because of the Osireion behind the temple) - were associated with spring festivals.

Rituals

Two main types of temple are: 'cultus' (worship of gods) and 'mortuary' (also worship of gods plus ancestral rituals - the worship of the the dead, deified king ~ even during his lifetime).

During the Old Kingdom, temple complexes comprised a mortuary temple with a causeway leading to a pyramid. In the New Kingdom, the tomb and its mortuary temple were separated physically. Along with his Abydos temple, Seti I also built a mortuary temple at Qurna (Thebes).

First and Second Courts

There are two types of relief in the temple:-

- 'bas relief' - where the background is cut away so that the scene elements (figures/inscription) are raised to stand proud from the wall
- 'relief en creur' - where the figure/inscription is incised or carved into the stone.

The reliefs in the First and Second Courts were decorated by Rameses II and are open to the sky. These reliefs are incised, not raised, and feature propagandist non-ritual scenes showing: The King in Battle, The Royal Children, and The Gods Accepting the King. Rameses's piety as Seti's son is recorded in 'The Great Dedicatory Inscription'.

First & Second Hypostyle Halls

These feature a primeval 'forest' of thick papyrus columns. Inscriptions on the columns feature the king's commission from the gods, his coronation, acceptance as king of the dead and Osiris, and the temple's foundation and consecration rituals. The hypostyle halls functioned as a processional route through the temple to the seven chapels of sanctuary.

Sanctuary

The 'Daily Temple Ritual' was performed for every temple deity. The fullest version is recorded in scenes and inscriptions at Abydos in 6 sanctuary chapels. There are comparisons at Denderah, Edfu and Medinet Habu. The Berlin Papyrus contains 66 episodes of 'Ritual of Amun, Karnak', 29 in common with the Abydos scenes.

Six Chapels of Sanctuary - Daily Ritual

The priest would awaken the god's statue and remove it from the shrine to the sanctuary altar. The god was believed to enter the statue. Performance of the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony on the statue was believed to ensure that this rite would continue to be magically enacted throughout eternity.'

The statue was then cleansed, censured and libated. It was freshly clothed, had face make-up applied and insignia added for the new day. Prayers were offered and a meal given thrice daily. At night, the god's statue was replaced in its shrine.

The raised relief in the six chapels shows the king using incense to perform 'The Censing of the Sacred Bark'.



Image courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society

Ritual of the Royal Ancestors

The collective worship of ancestral rulers (also known as the 'Ritual of Amenhotep I'), included Seti I in future anticipated form. It is mentioned in the Chapels of Seti, Nefertem-Ptah-sokar, the Gallery of Lists and the Hall of Barques. Elsewhere it is recorded in Papyrus Chester Beatty, on the Nuri Pyramids stela, and on temple reliefs at Denderah, Karnak, Medinet Habu, Edfu, Kom Ombo and Philae.

Chapel of Seti I

These scenes show Seti presenting offerings, during his lifetime, to his future dead form. They establish his kingship after death, enabling him to receive his daily offerings as a dead king in his mortuary temple.

The Nefertem-Ptah-Sokar complex

These are a set of chambers dedicated to the Memphite funerary gods and comprise the Nefertem-Ptah-Sokar Hall and its associated rooms. Preliminary rites may have been performed in these rooms in advance of the high-priest carrying out the main ritual in the Hall.

The Ritual of the Royal Ancestors continues in the:

Gallery of the Lists

The Gallery of the Lists connects the section of the temple with the service rooms in the south wing. Accessed from the Second Hypostyle Hall, its walls are inscribed with a list of gods and the famous 'Abydos King List' (the names of 76 approved kings). This represents the Royal Ancestors in the ritual performed here on their behalf.

The Ritual of the Royal Ancestors includes the First Reversion of Offerings where food from the god's altars from the Daily Temple Ritual and the Ritual of the Royal Ancestors was offered to the Ancestors on the King List. Food offerings were then taken to the Hall of Barques.

Hall of Barques

The sandstone ledge around the walls was probably used for storing barques. The ledge inscription indicates that food offerings were brought here at the conclusion of the Ritual of the Royal Ancestors. The offerings were then divided among the priests as payment. This is known as the 'Second Reversion of Offerings'. Food portions were then carried out of the temple through the west door via the 'Corridor of the Bull' and the 'Stairway Passage'.

Corridor of the Bull

This corridor continued to the Stairway Passage and contained magical/mythological wall scenes unrelated to rites. They include Rameses II driving four calves towards Khons and the deceased Seti I and a scene for trapping birds in a clap-net, symbolising the king's protection against enemies.

Stairway Passage

This enabled the removal of food offerings via the west exit. The wall scenes depict temple foundation rituals and divine speeches commemorate the temple's completion and consecration.

Service Rooms

The South Wing includes The Hall of Barques, The Butcher's Hall and storerooms where the god's possessions were stored and service rooms where the divine food offerings were prepared.

The Osiris Complex

Temples provided for the gods' regular needs with Daily Rituals, and celebrated special events with Annual Festivals. The 'Cult of Osiris' was celebrated at Abydos (being his burial place) at the Osireion and the Osiris Complex, where the 'Osiris Mysteries' were performed each year to ensure the resurrection of Osiris and Seti I. The **Osireion** is the cenotaph of Seti I as dead king and an Osiris.

The three shrines of Horus, Seti and Isis lead off the Osiris Hall.' There are a series of rites culminating in 'Raising the Djed-pillar' which symbolised the resurrection of Osiris, ensuring the renewal of his powers. Rituals in the Shrines of Horus, Seti and Isis represented the 'Installation of Seti I as an Osirian king and Osiris' heir and King of the Living'. Three subsidiary shrines lead off the Second Osiris Hall.'

TYPES OF SCENE

1. Decorative / Formal / Propagandist: the First Court frieze of the daughters of Rameses II
2. Historical: In the First Hypostyle Hall, the goddesses Isis, Hathor & Nephthys participate in coronation ceremonies; The king is shown whitewashing the temple in a purification rite associated with the foundation of the temple.
3. Ritual: For example, in the sanctuary Chapel of Isis, sacred events were performed regularly for the god or king. Magic ensured that rituals continued even when not physically performed.



Image courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society

Analysis of Temple Decoration

Professor David's doctoral thesis also involved analysing the wall reliefs in 4 stages:

Stage 1: Analysing the components of each scene:

Who appears in the scene? (Names, titles, head-wear, insignia)

What are they doing? (Ritual acts; title of rite / scene)

What are they saying? (Inscribed speeches)

Stage 2: Transliterate and translate all temple inscriptions - names, speeches.

Stage 3: The correct sequence of ritual scenes that the priest would have followed in that temple space was worked out. This was checked with comparative material from elsewhere.

Stage 4: Determine the overall use, purpose and function of the whole temple and its associated buildings, taking into account how the spaces functioned as ritual and non-ritual areas.

Difficulties encountered

Considerable restoration of parts of the temple.

Extent of decoration and inscriptions throughout temple - even on door jambs, lintels and columns.

Few or no comparisons elsewhere for some areas (e.g. the Osiris Complex).

Unfinished scenes with little or no accompanying text.

Variable quality of workmanship - carving & paint on top.

Publication

Professor David's PhD thesis was completed in 1971 and was published in 1973 as 'Religious Ritual at Abydos c1300 BC'. A second edition: 'A Guide to Religious Ritual at Abydos' appeared in 1981. A new, revised edition: 'Temple Ritual at Abydos' was published by the EES in 2016.

The 2nd & 3rd editions have line drawings of scenes and revised transliterations and translations.

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Mick Tweddle 12/12/24

