When Giovanni Battista Belzoni entered the Great Temple at Abu Simbel on 1 August, 1817—as recorded in a carved graffito which can still be seen in the sanctuary—he quickly realized that much of the decoration was centered on the same ancient hero he had seen the year before at the “Memnonium” (now known as the Ramesseum), and at the temples of Luxor and Karnak.

While he immediately recognized the quality of the reliefs inside, both Belzoni and the Nubian villagers were disappointed to find that there was little inside the temple. Belzoni recorded only decayed wood and some copper work from long-vanished doors, plus “two lions with hawk’s heads,” and other small statuary.

Adding to their great discomfort, the temperature in the newly opened temple was around 54° Celsius (almost 130° Fahrenheit), which made a preliminary survey and drawing of the reliefs difficult. Perspiration made the expedition sketchbooks so wet that Belzoni simply had to give up and return to Cairo.

Two years later, Henry Salt, the British Consul, led a second expedition to Abu Simbel, and did more careful work on the inscriptions and paintings. The temple was lit this time by small wax candles and, perched on ladders, the
other artists and draftsmen were able to record the inscriptions and images in detail, including the cartouches of Rameses II which were to prove so vital—alongside the Rosetta Stone—to Jean-François Champollion’s decipherment of hieroglyphs, three years later.

The first pillared hall, is dominated by eight statues of Rameses II in the form of the god of the underworld, Osiris (above), but the walls are covered in images of the king as the military protector of the Egyptian state.

Scenes of Rameses II smiting enemies before Amun-Re and Re-Horakhty appear on either side of the door, while a line of royal children appears underneath—princes on the right when facing the entrance, princesses on the left (right). The left (south) wall is dominated by unnamed campaigns against Syrians, Libyans, and Nubians. Some of these campaigns were almost certainly imaginary.

At the east (left) end of the south wall, Rameses, in all his glory, is seen in a chariot attacking a Syrian fortress, accompanied by three of his sons.

“We entered the finest and most extensive excavation in Nubia, one that can stand a competition with any in Egypt, except the tomb newly discovered in Beban el Ma’ook (KV 17: the tomb of Seti I).... Each pillar has a figure, not unlike those at Medinet Aboo, finely executed, and very little injured by time. The tops of their turbans reach the ceiling...”—Giovanni Belzoni, 1820.

Eight colossal statues of Ramesses II flank the nave of the first pillared hall of the Great Temple of Abu Simbel.

The princesses Nefertari II (“Beautiful Companion”) and Bakmut (“Handmaiden of Mut”) are two of the princess that form a procession in on the north side of the first pillared hall of the Great Temple at Abu Simbel. Each of Ramesses II’s daughters is holding a sistrum: a rattle with jingling metal discs that was particularly associated with Hathor, goddess of joy, music and happiness.
“The walls are covered with beautiful hieroglyphics.... they exhibit battles, storming of castles, triumphs over Ethiopians, sacrifices, etc. In some places is to be seen the same hero as at Medinet Aboo, but in a different posture.—G. Belzoni, 1820.

One particular scene in the first pillared hall of Abu Simbel appears to have been strongly inspired by a relief not at Medinet Habu, but carved for Sethy I on the outer wall of the Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak. In both scenes, the king spears a Libyan chieftain while treading on a fallen warrior.
Halfway along the same wall is a dramatic image of the king spearing a Libyan chieftain (opposite page, bottom)—a copy of a relief created for Rameses’ father Sethy I on the outer wall of the Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak temple. To the right again, Rameses appears in his chariot accompanied by his pet lion—driving Nubians before him toward the gods on the next wall on the right.

The entire north wall of the great hall is taken up with a representation of the Battle of Qadesh against the Hittite empire, which was a defining event in the life of Rameses II and is widely represented in the temples that the pharaoh modified or had built.

Although claimed as a resounding victory by the Egyptian king, historians today suggest the outcome was closer to a draw, with the surviving Hittite forces retreating to their walled city, protected by the Orontes River, and Rameses’ troops simply going home.

The rear of the first pillared hall connects to a smaller hall (see above), where three doors open to the vestibule—the central door being in line with the sanctuary. These lead to the most sacred area of the temple, entered only by the highest, most privileged ranks of the attendant priesthood.

Surrounded by the Orontes River, the fortified city of Qadesh (near the modern Lebanon–Syria border) provided a stronghold for the survivors of the epic battle between Rameses II and the Hittites.

While the Hittites sustained much heavier losses on the battlefield, Ramesses’ troops failed to take the city and claim the area for Egypt, so both sides have good reason to claim the battle as their victory.

Conflict ground on for another 16 years after the battle, and under pressure from other rivals, the Egyptians and Hittites opted for an alliance. The world’s first documented peace treaty ended over two centuries of conflict. It included the return of each other’s prisoners, as well as a pledge to resolve any future disputes amicably.
Returning to the entrance and looking toward the sanctuary, the inevitable foreshortening involved in a rock-cut temple makes the rise in the floor toward the interior much more noticeable than it would be in a similar freestanding temple. The ceiling also becomes increasingly lower, and the distance between the walls narrows, so that the eye is increasingly focused on the sanctuary.

The ultimate focus of all activity in the temple was the sanctuary (above). Only the high priest or the ritually purified king would enter here. The main features of the sanctuary were the altar upon which the sacred barque or shrine rested and the four life-sized statues against the west wall: from left to right, Ptah, Amun-Re, the deified Rameses II, and Re-Horakhty. Rameses II appears equal to the other gods in the sanctuary of the Great Temple, and it seems certain that his divine status also surpasses that normally associated with a living ruler.

Already known to the outside world before Belzoni’s 1817 expedition, the Small Temple was carved into the rock face 100 meters (330 feet) away from the Great Temple. The rock here may not have been of the same quality as that from which the Great Temple was carved, as a number of slight adjustments in alignment were evidently made while construction was underway.

Both temples share the same general characteristics, and the rooms the same functions, but the Small Temple has only one pillared hall, not two (see opposite page). Behind this lies a vestibule, with two small associated storerooms, and the sanctuary.

While Rameses (with Nefertiry looking on), smites captives to either side of the entrance within the pillared hall, the unusually elongated figures of the goddesses and the queen (see opposite), and the presentation of flowers to the gods, immediately project a gentler aspect in comparison to the decoration of the Great Temple.

The pillared hall is dominated by two sets of three pillars topped along the central aisle by a beautiful representation of the face of Hathor within the handle and sounding box of the sistrum rattle associated with her worship. The other three sides of these columns are covered by representations of the king, the queen, and gods, displaying great subtlety and, often, delicacy.

The three entrances to the vestibule form two pillars. On the left-hand pillar the queen presents flowers and holds a sistrum before the goddess Anukis, who was popular throughout Lower Nubia (see page 54).

Passing through the middle doorway, the priests would enter the vestibule. Two small storerooms lie to the left and...
The pillared hall of the Small Temple. The god Thoth appears of the second column on the left, and Rameses II offers incense on the column to the right. Further to the rear, on the left, the seated goddess Hathor of Abshek is presented with flowers, and, to the rear on the right, Mut can be seen in a similar scene.

Looking back from the sanctuary door toward the temple entrance, the Egyptian priests would face one of the most elegant images ever created in ancient Egypt. The graceful form of Nefertiry, wearing a Nubian wig, is “crowned” by the equally graceful forms of the goddesses Hathor of Abshek (in front of the queen) and Isis (behind the queen). All three wear the uraeus, flat-topped cylindrical headdress or crown (modius), solar disk, and cow horns (with the addition of twin plumes in the case of Nefertiry).

Nefertiry likely never saw her finished temple at Abu Simbel; she had probably already died when it was dedicated in the 24th year of Ramesses’ reign. Nefertiry is noticeably absent from reliefs marking the dedication ceremonies. Instead, Ramesses is depicted with his daughter Meritamen, identified as queen.
On the southwest (left) wall of the pillared hall, Nefertiry offers the sistrum rattle of Hathor and flowers to the goddess Anukis, who wears a crown of bound plumes. Above one of the storerooms in the vestibule, the goddess Hathor in cow form stands on a reed boat. Note that her tail takes the form of an open papyrus flower.

The northeast (right) wall of the Small Temple’s pillared hall features Nefertiry offering (playing?) sistums to the goddess Hathor. As a sign of her divine nature, Nefertiry stands at the same height as the king—and the gods. To the right is the ram-headed fertility god Heryshef, who is being offered flowers by Ramesses II (out of frame). On the left, he offers to Re-Horakhty.

right of the vestibule. Above the storeroom to the left, Nefertiry offers flowers to the goddess Hathor in the form of a cow standing on a boat; to the right, Rameses offers flowers in a similar scene.

In the center of the sanctuary, a statue of Hathor in cow form is carved as if emerging from the hill, with a figure of the king under her chin.

In a well-known twist to the story of this fascinating pair of temples, they were fully dismantled between 1964 and 1966, and relocated above the rising waters of Lake Nasser—opening again to the visitor after the inauguration of the new site on 22 September 1968.

Condensed from *Abu Simbel and the Nubian Temples* (AUC Press). All photos courtesy of the author.

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