

THE TEMPLE PALACE OF RAMESSES II AT ABYDOS

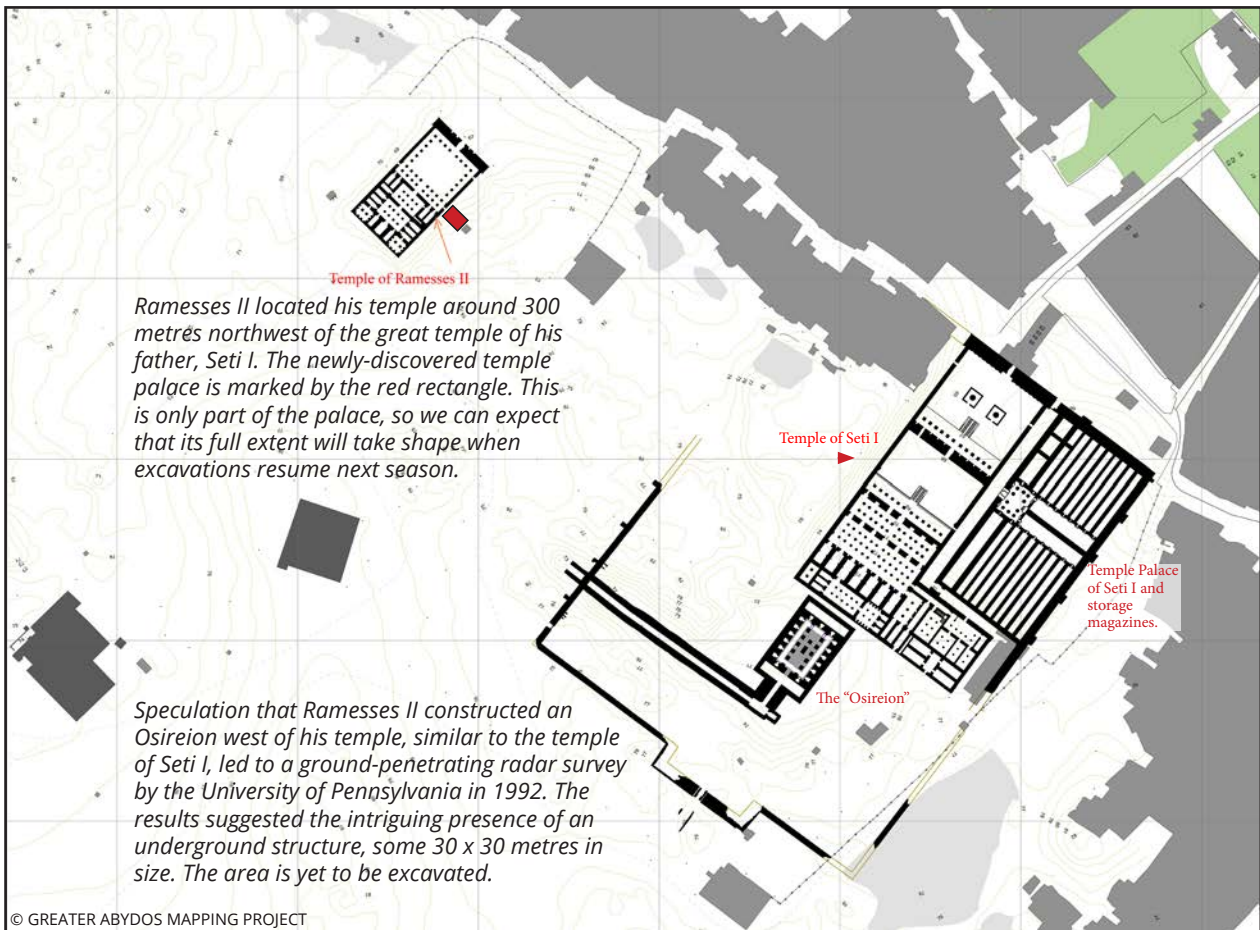
A new discovery by the New York University Expedition to the Temple of Ramesses II in Abydos forever changes the archaeological landscape.



© NYU EXPEDITION TO THE TEMPLE OF RAMESSES II IN ABYDOS

This is the newly-discovered Temple Palace of Ramesses II, adjacent to the king's Abydos temple. It was here that the king would have retired

after a long journey to Abydos for ceremonial and ritual duties, and where he would have held private audiences with courtiers and officials.



Ramesses II located his temple around 300 metres northwest of the great temple of his father, Seti I. The newly-discovered temple palace is marked by the red rectangle. This is only part of the palace, so we can expect that its full extent will take shape when excavations resume next season.

Speculation that Ramesses II constructed an Osireion west of his temple, similar to the temple of Seti I, led to a ground-penetrating radar survey by the University of Pennsylvania in 1992. The results suggested the intriguing presence of an underground structure, some 30 x 30 metres in size. The area is yet to be excavated.

Around 1280 B.C., a young Ramesses II—ordered the construction of a new temple on the noisy Abydene landscape. At this point, work was still underway on the large nearby temple of the recently-deceased king, his father Seti I. Abydos rang to the sound of chisels tapping out delicate reliefs, and the chants (and grunts) of work crews hauling heavy limestone blocks into place. This frenzy of activity marked the large-scale reestablishment of the cult of Osiris at Abydos after almost six decades of neglect, driven by the Aten-centric philosophy of King Akhenaten.

Ramesses built his new temple around 300 metres northwest of his father's, and decorating it with reliefs and hieroglyphic text would continue throughout his life.

It appears that Ramesses intended that his new temple would stand forever. An inscription on the southern wall of the temple's Second Court (the right-most court in the diagram on the opposite page), records a speech made by Ramesses II where he addresses future pharaohs and asks that they bring offerings (live captives) to his temple:



"Oh you kings of Upper and Lower Egypt who shall come hereafter..."



you shall capture those who rebel against Egypt.



May you present (some) of them to my august temple!"

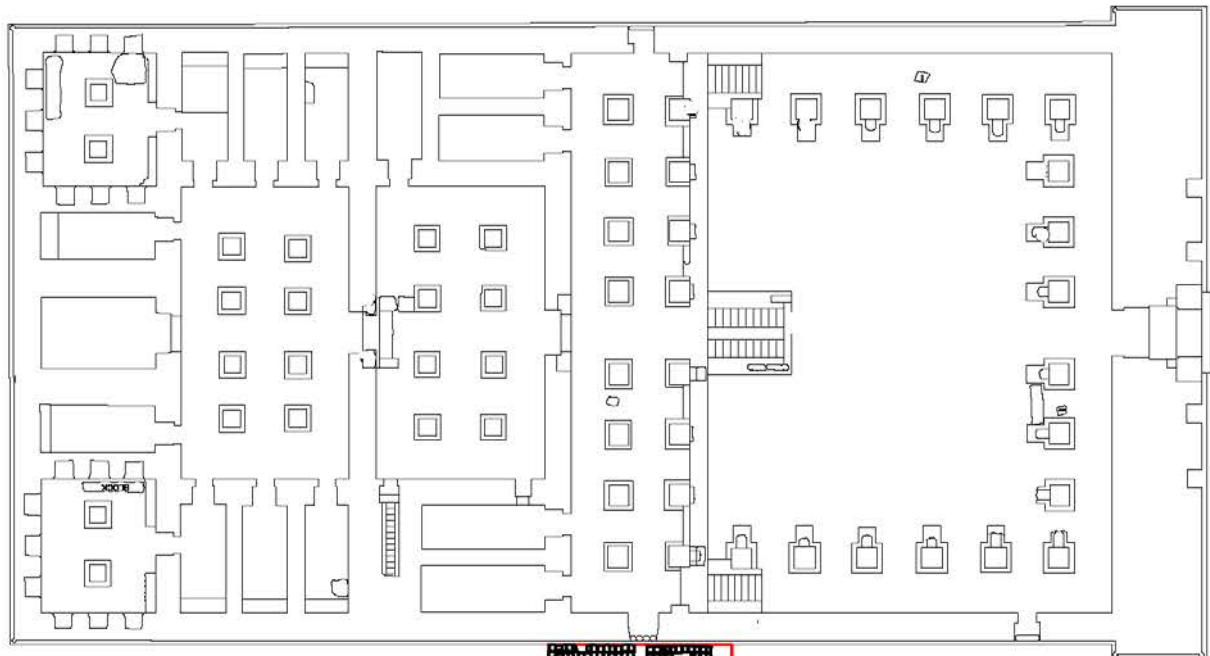
While the temple walls once stood around eight metres high, over the millennia they have been reduced by theft to just over two. Those bottom two metres, however, are renowned for the graceful quality of the reliefs and the vibrant colours of the original paint, captured on porcelain-like, fine-grained limestone.

It may be that reuse of the temple by Coptic Christians in the 4th century A.D. helped preserve the reliefs. Usually, such occupation leads to iconoclastic defacement of the pagan images, but here it seems the Copts took an easier approach, and covered most of them with gypsum instead.

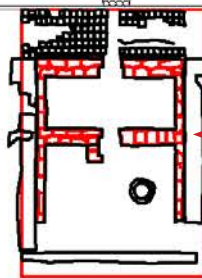
There had been some piecemeal poking-about at the site in the early 1800s, but it wasn't until 1869 that French archaeologist Auguste Mariette fully excavated Ramesses II's temple. Unfortunately, his records of the excavation were rather sparse, and the temple's architecture and delicate reliefs have been exposed to the elements ever since.

It was with this need to document the site, as well as urgently conserve the at-risk stonework, that in 2008, Drs. Sameh Iskander and Ogden Goelet founded the New York University Expedition to the Temple of Ramesses II in Abydos. This field project was to produce the first comprehensive documentation of the Temple of Ramesses II at Abydos. Supported by ARCE, the mission included high-resolution photography, epigraphic line-drawings of the reliefs and hieroglyphs, as well as architectural drawings.

Little did they know that their work would also lead to what Mostafa Waziri, secretary general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, described as "a very important discovery which will change, for the first time, the plan of the temple more than 160 years since its discovery."



This plan shows the location of Ramesses II's temple palace in relation to the temple proper. The limestone walls of the palace are coloured red. Uniquely, these walls are encased in thick layers of mudbrick. This hasn't been encountered with any other Ramesside temple palace. Why the mudbrick? As always, a new discovery leads to new mysteries to solve.



Mudbrick wall enveloping the limestone walls.

© NYU EXPEDITION TO THE TEMPLE OF RAMESSES II IN ABYDOS

THE DISCOVERY

In February this year, the archaeological mission, led by Dr. Iskander, was undertaking clearance work around the base of the temple walls to recover scattered architectural elements. During this work, on the southern side of the temple, the mission came upon a previously unknown stone walkway leading from the southwestern doorway of the temple's First Court. The routine clearance now took on a new energy as the team followed this walkway until it arrived at the entrance to a building with walls over a metre thick, and bearing the name of Ramesses II. They had found the palace associated with Ramesses' Abydos Temple.

The walls and floors of the temple palace are built of

limestone, and in the temple's second hall, the excavators discovered a remaining sandstone column base. Fragments of lintels carried inscriptions of the king, and pieces of a decorated star-spangled ceiling were also found. Although only part of it has been excavated so far, it is clear to see that this temple palace may have been compact, but it was designed to dazzle.

Ironically, one of the reasons the temple palace may have remained undetected for all this time, is that to clear the site, the New York University mission had to remove tons of debris. The spoil heaps created by Mariette during his excavations, 150 years earlier, were effectively hiding the smaller temple palace.

SO WHAT IS A TEMPLE PALACE?

All Ramesside temples are built in an east-west alignment and have a ceremonial palace on the southern side. These sorts of palaces had been regular features of memorial temple complexes since the reign of King Horemheb at the end of the previous dynasty.

The most famous example of a temple palace is probably that of the 20th Dynasty's Ramesses III, which annexes his memorial temple at Medinet Habu on Luxor's east bank.

As the kings were occasionally obliged to stay at the temple, the complex was built to accommodate a ceremonial palace. It was here that the king would be dressed in the regalia necessary for the various rituals within the temple. It may have also been here that he would be ritually purified before entering the temple. The temple palace could also serve as an administration centre, as well as a place to receive foreign or regional delegations.

ABYDOS
<p>Abydos in southern (Upper) Egypt was regarded as holy ground for the entire length of ancient Egypt's history: from the Predynastic (before 3100 B.C.) through to the Roman period. The principal deity here was Osiris, who promised rebirth in the afterlife; each pharaoh aspired to become a manifestation of this god after death.</p> <p>Unified Egypt's first pharaohs were buried at Abydos, and during the Middle Kingdom, one of their old tombs—that of the 1st Dynasty's King Djer (ca. 3000 B.C.)—was cleared of sand, restored, and reinterpreted as the burial place of Osiris himself.</p> <p>Each year, a festival procession poured out from the Temple of Osiris in the town of Abydos and headed across the desert to the site of his "tomb". A pilgrimage to Abydos to witness the procession was a "bucket-list" experience for Egyptians at all levels of society.</p>



© NYU EXPEDITION TO THE TEMPLE OF RAMESSES II IN ABYDOS

The southwest corner of the Temple of Ramesses II at Abydos. The golden cartouches of the king can be seen on the exposed faces of both the western (left) and southern

(right) sides of the foundation stone. The reliefs on the western wall are part of a series dramatising Ramesses II's gallantry at the Battle of Kadesh.

Commenting to *Newsweek*, Dr. Joann Fletcher of the University of York, said that “the fact Ramesses II required a palace at Abydos also reveals that he didn’t just order a new temple at the site but was spending enough time there to warrant such accommodation.”

ONE MYSTERY SOLVED

During the course of their work, the Abydos Expedition solved a long-standing mystery. Ramesses II is famously known for appropriating his predecessor’s statuary and monuments and claiming them for himself. While this was common practice throughout Egyptian history, Ramesses “turbo-charged” the practice, so that today, his cartouche is the most commonly seen throughout Egypt.

With this in mind, a question had long lingered in the minds of Egyptologists: did Ramesses II commission his temple as part of the return to Osiris in the aftermath of the Amarna period, or was it an unfinished project of his father’s—like the Temple of Seti I at Abydos—that young Ramesses inherited on his father’s death?

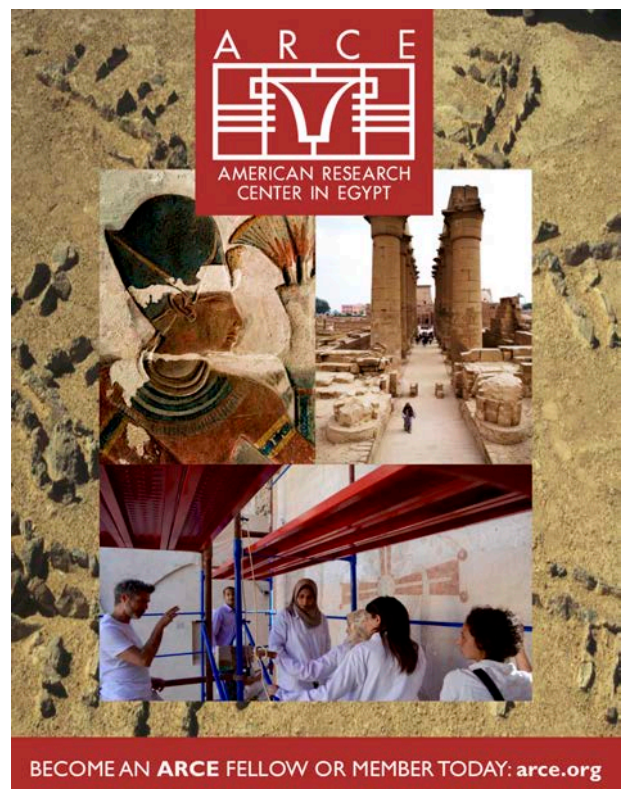
This year the mission excavated the four corners of the temple and uncovered the foundation blocks that were put in place for the temple’s inauguration (above). All four blocks contained golden cartouches of Ramesses II. The westernmost blocks were the most important: since temples were constructed from west to east, these blocks represented the first parts of the temple to be built. Here was proof that Ramesses II’s Temple at Abydos was conceived by the young king, and not by his energetic father.

WHAT’S NEXT?

Speaking with *NILE Magazine*, Dr. Sameh Iskander noted that the temple palace revealed so far (see plan on page 21) is only a part of the building. The complete structure will

hopefully be exposed next season when the NYU mission resumes their work in January 2020.

For the Temple of Ramesses II, the next phase is minor restoration: to gather together as many fragments as possible—from around the temple area as well as government stores—and put them together in context. At *NILE*, we look forward to hearing more fascinating news from Abydos.





A detailed look at the cartouches on the southern side of the southwest foundation stone of Ramesses II Temple at Abydos. These cartouches appear on all four corners of the temple, showing Ramesses II's birth (left) and throne (right) names painted in a golden colour. The cartouches are crowned by

luminous double ostrich plumes that may have been associated with the rites of coronation and the new ruler "arising" on the throne.

The cartouches are accompanied by a radiant sun disc (image of rebirth), and the hieroglyph for "gold", possibly representing the notion of eternity.

© NYU EXPEDITION TO THE TEMPLE OF RAMESSES II IN ABYDOS