



Fig. 1. Excavations in progress during the first season (1994) of renewed work in the central part of the Senwosret III mortuary temple.

## A Hundred Years at South Abydos

### Reconstructing the Temple of Pharaoh Senwosret III

by Josef Wegner

#### DISCOVERY AND REDISCOVERY OF A ROYAL MORTUARY TEMPLE

Late in 1899 a young British archaeologist, David Randall-MacIver, was exploring the desert at Abydos in southern Egypt and he noticed a block of dressed limestone protruding from the sand. Randall-MacIver had come to Egypt to study skeletal remains with the famous excavator W.M. Flinders Petrie. Randall-MacIver suspected the limestone block marked the location of an ancient building. With Petrie's encouragement Randall-

MacIver began excavating the area and quickly realized that the block was only part of the ruins of a large temple. Over a period of several weeks during January and February of 1900, Randall-MacIver exposed a significant part of the temple's architecture and made a groundplan of it. During his excavation he discovered two large statues in red quartzite and several other decorated fragments which bore the name of pharaoh Khakaure-Senwosret III (ca. 1878–1841 BCE), a king who reigned in the latter part of Egypt's 12th Dynasty (ca. 1991–1759 BCE).

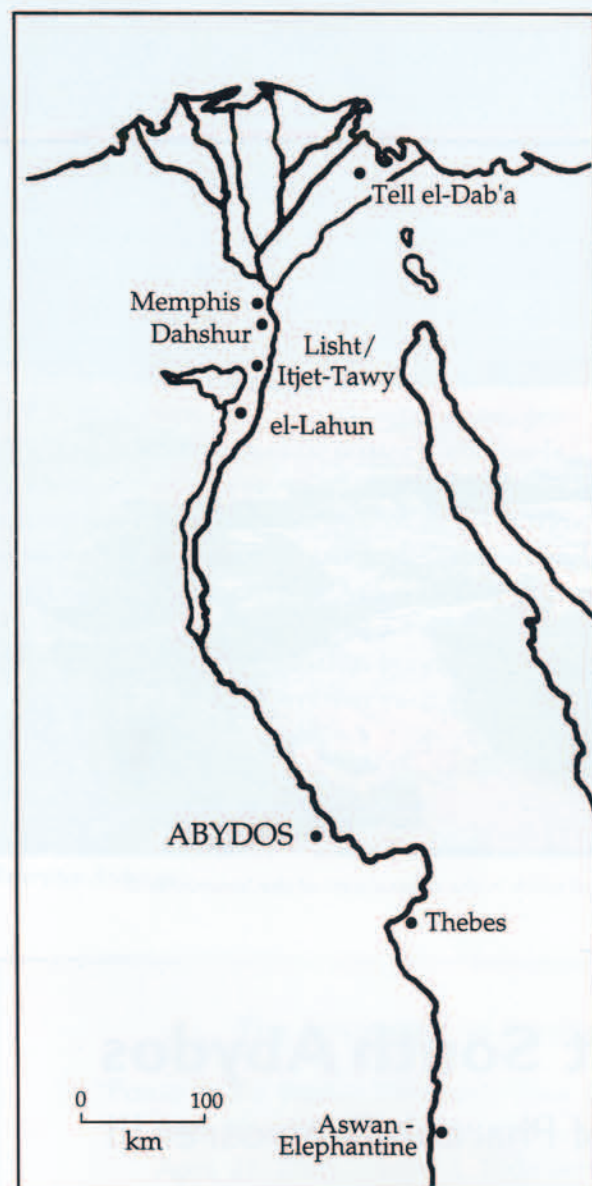


Fig. 2. Abydos is located in southern Egypt, on the western bank of the Nile River.

David Randall-MacIver was hired in 1905 at the University of Pennsylvania Museum as the first full-time curator of the Egyptian Section. He held the position until 1911, serving as director of the Museum's Eckley B. Coxe Expedition to Egypt and Nubia and authoring several publications on the early sites excavated by the Coxe Expedition. In 1911 he left the Museum to take a position at the American Geographical Society in New York, and after the First World War his interests took him away from Egyptology altogether.

Although Randall-MacIver's association with the University Museum and Egypt is long past, the Museum's connection with the temple he uncovered at Abydos continues—now precisely a century after the initial discovery (Figs. 1, 2).

In 1994 as part of the Pennsylvania-Yale Expedition to Abydos (established in 1967 and co-directed by D. O'Connor and W.K. Simpson), we began reinvestigation of the temple of Senwosret III (Fig. 3a). Although Randall-MacIver had produced an important plan of the temple resulting from his 1900 season, his work raised more questions than it answered. His plan showed a rectangular courtyard with limestone pavement surrounded by extensive blocks of rooms built in mudbrick—all of unclear function. Moreover, Randall-MacIver had found several carved stone relief fragments with the name and royal titles of Senwosret III, but he documented no other remains of the temple's architecture nor any small objects (such as pottery), items which are crucial in understanding the form and function of an ancient building.

We have continued work for three seasons (1994, 1997, and 1999), devoting in total nine full months of excavation to the temple of Senwosret III. This work has produced a wealth of new information which allows us to reconstruct in considerable detail the physical appearance of the building. Several thousand shattered fragments of the temple's stone reliefwork and statuary have been recovered, permitting us to piece together a picture of the building's original decoration. Thousands of small objects excavated in contexts undisturbed by Randall-MacIver are providing crucial evidence on the daily activities of the people who worked in and around the temple of Senwosret III. As a result we are now able to examine the temple as a living religious institution.

#### THE FUNERARY COMPLEX "ENDURING-ARE-THE-PLACES"

The temple of Senwosret III is not an isolated monument but is part of the important religious center of Abydos (ancient Abdu to the Egyptians), positioned at the edge of the desert on the western bank of the Nile River. Abydos was the burial place

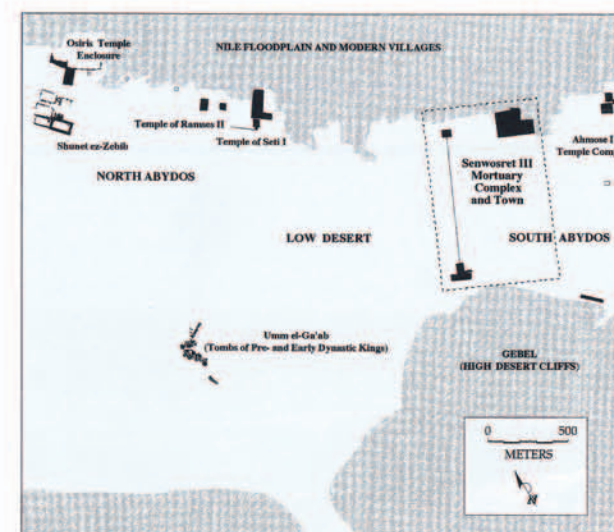


Fig. 3a. General map of greater Abydos showing the location of the Senwosret III mortuary complex and associated temple at South Abydos.

Prepared by Mary Ann Pouls-Wegner

of the earliest pharaohs of Egypt (ca. 3000–2800 BCE) and later became the primary religious center associated with the god Osiris, ruler of the netherworld. An early temple in Abydos was dedicated to the god Khentiamentiu (who later merged with Osiris), and successive kings undertook continual renovation of and improvement to this temple. Motivated by the desire for eternal association with Osiris, both royalty and private people commissioned commemorative monuments for themselves to be built near the cult place of the god.

Senwosret III was among those who had a funerary complex built for himself at Abydos (Fig. 3b). This complex included a subterranean tomb (in which the king may ultimately have been buried) and an associated mortuary temple—the structure Randall-MacIver discovered in 1899. The temple is situated at the very margin of the low desert and adjacent to the rich agricultural plain of the Nile River. Nearly a kilometer from the temple is the tomb, a massive structure carved beneath the high limestone cliffs that form the western rim of the Nile Valley.

In establishing his mortuary complex at Abydos, Senwosret III desired it to be a place where his veneration would go on in perpetuity. The temple was provided with an economic foundation to support its long-term existence, and formed the

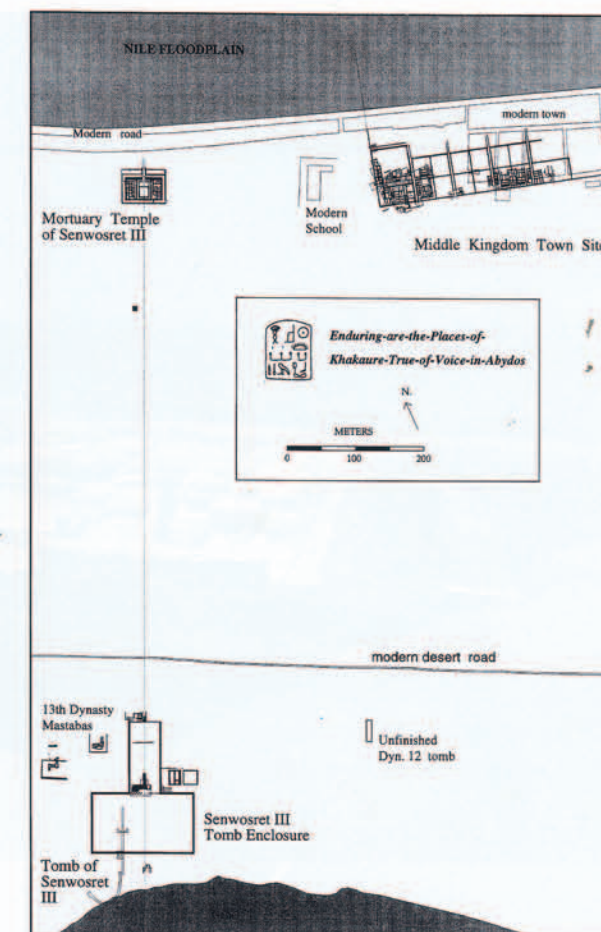


Fig. 3b. Detailed plan showing the components of the Senwosret III mortuary complex (tomb enclosure, temple, and associated town).

religious hub of the complex since it was the place where Senwosret III's mortuary cult was celebrated for nearly two centuries after the death of the king. A town was founded nearby to house the priests and officials responsible for keeping the mortuary cult operating. As we have discovered in our excavations in the temple and nearby town, the entire locale was named "Enduring-are-the-Places-of-Khakaure-true-of-voice-in-Abydos" (in Egyptian, *Wah-sut-Khakaure-maa-kheru-em-Abdu*).

#### "BEAUTIFUL-IS-THE-KA": THE MORTUARY TEMPLE OF SENWOSRET III

The temple takes the form of a rectangular mudbrick building which contains the remains of a stone cult structure at its center (Figs. 3b, 4; reconstruction Figs. 5, 6). The temple was



Fig. 4. The cult structure occupied the central portion of the Senwosret III mortuary temple. Although it was destroyed and the temple dismantled in antiquity, enough architecture survived to enable us to understand key elements of the buildings.

divided into three equal blocks. In the center was the actual cult building, a nearly square structure which originally stood on a raised platform and was fronted by an open court with a colonnade of fluted columns around its periphery. Flanking this were two blocks of rooms. On the west side was a block of three house units which we now know were used as dwellings for temple staff and priests. On the east side was a complex of rooms which served as a storage magazine for the temple's holdings. Parts of this area were used in preparing materials for ritual presentation within the cult building.

Although the stone cult building was destroyed in antiquity, significant evidence is available to us through preserved foundations and fragments of the building's architectural elements and decoration. During or after Egypt's New Kingdom (ca. 1500–1000 BCE), the temple was dismantled and most of the stonework was carted off elsewhere—perhaps to be used for the foun-

dations of a later pharaoh's temple or possibly to be crushed and burned to make plaster. The result is that only shattered fragments remain on site. These fragments—several thousand bits of the decorated stone cult building and about two hundred other pieces of statues and architecture—present us with a situation equivalent to that of a jigsaw puzzle in which the majority of the pieces are missing. Altogether the surviving fragments account for less than one percent of the original decorated area of the temple. Although this means that the temple cannot be physically reassembled, there is fortunately enough material to reconstruct key elements of the decoration of the limestone cult building and thereby gain an understanding of its religious meaning.

The building was entirely adorned in carved and painted reliefs (Figs. 7, 8). The exterior was decorated with sunken relief (in which hieroglyphs and figures are incised below the level of the background). This was painted a light blue.

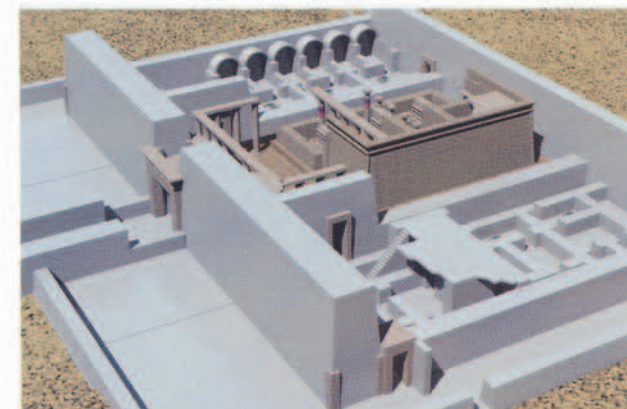


Fig. 5. Computer-generated reconstruction of the temple of Senwosret III (view looking southeast). The temple staff and priests occupied the house units in the foreground, while the rooms on the far side of the central cult structure were used for storage and preparation of ritual materials.

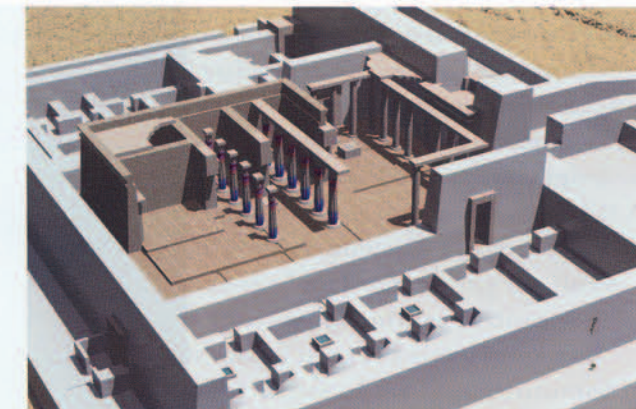


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the temple (looking northwest), showing the interior of the cult structure and its colonnaded entrance court.

The recovered fragments allow us to reconstruct rows of hieroglyphs enumerating the titles of the king and describing his divine associations with Osiris, lord of Abydos. Life-size figures decorated the facade as well, including representations of Senwosret III and Osiris, and probably also the king's son and successor, Amenemhat III.

The interior of the building was decorated in raised relief (a technique in which the background itself is carved away from the hieroglyphs and figures). The relief included scenes depicting the presentation of food offerings to the deceased Senwosret III. Here, too, were life-size figures of Osiris, Senwosret III, and Amenemhat III. In addition to the wall decoration, the temple contained many statues of the king: two red-quartzite figures (discovered originally by Randall-MacIver; see cover) adorned the columned forecourt, and a series of life-size alabaster statues were set up inside the cult building (Fig. 9).

In 1997 we discovered an area outside the front pylon of the temple where massive quantities of beer jars and clay seal impressions had been discarded. Hundreds of seal impressions in this deposit were stamped with an official seal which carried the simple statement in hieroglyphs: "Beautiful is the Ka." The imprint of a flat wood surface on the back of all examples shows that these sealings had been used to seal wooden doorways within the temple. Every evening the



Fig. 7. A limestone fragment decorated in sunken relief that originally adorned the exterior of the stone cult building. The sunken areas were painted a light blue. H. 15.7 cm

Fig. 8. The interior walls of the cult building were covered in painted, raised relief. Although only fragments of the decoration remain, it seems to have included scenes honoring the deceased Senwosret III. W. 15.0 cm



priests would close the doors, wrap the knobs with string, and press a clay seal on top. This official stamp reading "Beautiful-is-the-Ka" appears to be the actual ancient name of the temple itself. To the Egyptians the *Ka* was an aspect of the individual which provided life force—a spirit of energy and sustenance. Thus the temple is dedicated to the eternal veneration and sustenance of the *Ka* or spirit of the deceased king Senwosret III.

#### THE ROLE OF "BEAUTIFUL-IS-THE-KA" AND SENWOSRET III'S TOMB

Through both the name and the evidence for the decorative scheme of the temple we can identify it as a building which the ancient Egyptians would have called a "Ka Chapel." It was built to sustain an offering cult for the *Ka* of the deceased king. Located at Abydos it had special significance in linking Senwosret III with Osiris, a deity with whom the king and other dead pharaohs became associated in the next life. A large proportion of the decoration of the building appears to have illustrated in text and image the divine relationship Senwosret III held with Osiris.

Now it should be noted that Senwosret III is not the only pharaoh to have constructed a build-

ing of this nature at Abydos. Other kings before him built similar structures (though on a smaller scale) near the main temple of Osiris in north Abydos. Senwosret III, however, chose to expand the concept of the royal Ka Chapel to create a full mortuary complex complete with an underground tomb. Arthur Weigall and C.T. Currelly excavated the tomb enclosure itself in 1902, just two years after Randall-MacIver discovered the temple. They found a huge underground rock-cut tomb which contained a royal sarcophagus. The tomb had been robbed in ancient times, but evidence in the form of pottery and alabaster vessels suggested that it had been used for a royal burial of the Middle Kingdom period. Since Senwosret III also possessed a pyramid complex at the site of Dahshur in the north (near modern Cairo), it is a matter of some interest whether or not he was actually buried at the sacred site of Abydos. In coming years we hope to reopen the underground tomb and thoroughly investigate its contents in order to answer this question.

#### RECONSTRUCTING DAILY LIFE AT THE TEMPLE

Probably the most fascinating aspect of our work on the Senwosret III temple is the evidence



Fig. 9. A fragment of the mouth and ceremonial beard from a life-sized alabaster (calcite) statue of the king that originally sat in the temple's sanctuary. H. 18 cm; W. 10 cm

that has come to light on the way it worked as a living institution. As noted above, the temple was not a solitary mausoleum but formed the religious and economic center for the large and thriving community of "Enduring-are-the-Places-of-Khakaure." An ongoing ritual program which included an elaborate sequence of cultic acts was performed there every day. The temple rites included the cleansing and purifying of images of the king housed in the temple, the presentation of incense and food offerings, and the recitation of prayers to invoke the *Ka* of Senwosret III. The ritual service was maintained by a staff divided into four "phyles" (divisions of priests), each comprising about ten or twelve men. These men would have been stationed at the temple for one lunar month of service, after which they would have returned to their regular houses and their families. It is these men who occupied the three house units in the western block of the temple.

During the 1997 and 1999 seasons we excavated deposits of rubbish left by the priests and

other personnel who worked in the temple. The unglamorous task of going through ancient rubbish mounds can often provide the most useful information for reconstructing the realities of daily life at an ancient site. This has certainly turned out to be the case at the Senwosret III temple. The largest accumulation of material occurs just outside the block containing the three houses. It contains vast quantities of discarded pottery vessels mixed in with animal bone and plant remains—evidence of the food consumed by those on duty in the temple.

Luckily for us, many of the people who worked in the temple also left their "signatures" at the site. These occur as impressed clay sealings (Fig. 10). In ancient Egypt, an official of any status possessed a seal (usually in the form of a scarab made of steatite or faience) which he would use in the course of his daily administrative duties. (Women of status could also possess their own seals and these are frequently found in the nearby town.) The seals would be pressed into lumps of clay which were used to fasten a whole range of items, including papyrus documents, boxes, bags and jars, and doorways. While the seals of many lower-status officials had simple decorative designs, a good proportion of Egyptian officialdom during the Middle Kingdom possessed seals that carried their name and titles in hieroglyphs. During our three seasons at the temple we have excavated close to 10,000 seal impressions (and even a few actual seals lost by unfortunate officials), many of which have personal names.

From this material are attested people like the Beer-brewer Amenemhat; the Overseer of cattle stalls Amen; the Temple overseer Irefseneb; the Overseer of the bakeries and breweries Senwosret-Seheku; the Lector-priest Sobekhotep; the Treasury-scribe Seneb; the God's-Servant priest Montu; the Purification priest of the sanctuary Huy; and many others. Some of these individuals are also commemorated on dedicatory objects which they had set up inside the cult building (Fig. 11). Others in the local community are attested by evidence such as a name list which may record workers who had been paid in grain rations for services at the temple (Fig. 12).



Fig. 10. A clay seal impression recording in hieroglyphs the name and titles of a temple official. Lumps of clay were used to fasten a range of items and would be stamped with the seal of an official.

W. 2.0 cm

Fig. 11. A votive limestone offering table originally set up as a dedication in the cult building, probably by someone who worked in the temple.

H. 13 cm; W. 14 cm




In addition to the priests on duty there were many other people who came to the temple on a daily basis. A significant proportion of these other officials were involved in the production and supply of foodstuffs. On the eastern side of the temple we have exposed parts of an expansive area devoted to baking and brewing. It was here that the bread and beer (used in great quantity in the temple) were produced. We know also from inscribed seal impressions that there were animal stalls and slaughter areas nearby where cattle and other animals were raised, butchered, and prepared for offering in the cult building of Senwosret III.

Our 1999 season revealed that the rubbish deposits beside the priests' house-block are beautifully stratified (and undisturbed by Randall-MacIver's work on the temple in 1900). The earliest material was thrown onto virgin desert sand. Layer upon layer of rubbish extending over a span of about 150 years accumulated on top, eventually forming mounds of debris about eight feet deep. This stratification of the rubbish allows us to look at the long-term development of the temple and to address issues such as changes over time in personnel, in pottery use, or in animal consumption.

It was immediately apparent that the names of the people involved in the temple changed over time. Among the seal impressions of regular priests and officials we found quantities of seal impressions with the names of a sequence of mayors who resided in the nearby town. These men also held the title of "overseer of the temple" and "overseer of temple-priesthood." Four main mayors can now be identified. These men, in sequence, are Nakht son of Khentykhet, Neferher, Amenysoneb, and Sehetep-ib.

Discovering the activities of the mayors of "Enduring-are-the-Places-of-Khakaure" in the Senwosret III temple is made doubly exciting by

all sides lies evidence for the daily life of the people who spent their lives in the service of the departed Ka of Senwosret III and for whom the temple "Beautiful-is-the-Ka" formed the spiritual and economic heart of their community. 

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the fact that in our parallel excavations in the nearby town we have identified a palatial mansion which served as the residence of the mayor (see *Expedition 41*[3]: 4–5). In debris in and around this mansion we found the names of these same four mayors recorded on seal impressions and other objects. Additional seal impressions found in part of the mayoral residence record the names of the officials who directed the phyles of priests who worked in the temple. This evidence shows us that it was the mayor himself who was the chief administrator of the temple of Senwosret III. The mayor was responsible for administering much of the economic and religious activity which went on in and around the temple.

A hundred years after the temple of Senwosret III was first discovered by David Randall-MacIver it is producing volumes of new information on the culture and society of Egypt's Middle Kingdom. Having completed the excavation of the main building during the last three seasons, we will in coming years increasingly focus on areas beyond the temple building itself. Around the temple on

our work. At Abydos, the research has benefited greatly from the kind attention given by Dr. Yahya el-Masry, Mr. Ahmed el-Khattib, and Mr. Muhammed Abd el-Megally. I would also like to thank Drs. David O'Connor and William Kelly Simpson, co-directors of the combined Pennsylvania-Yale-Institute of Fine Arts (NYU) Expedition for support of the work at South Abydos. Dr. David Silverman, Curator in Charge, Egyptian Section of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, has contributed greatly to the success of our work through interest and support during all three seasons. The CAD model of the temple was done by Emad Asfour to whom I am indebted for his time and interest in the work. The research has been funded in part through the National Science Foundation, American Research Center in Egypt, Marilyn Simpson Fund, Yale University, Coxe Fund, University of Pennsylvania Faculty Research Foundation, and field funds contributed through the office of Dr. Jeremy Sabloff, Williams Director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.



Fig. 12. Ostracon with a list of personal names in Hieratic. The list may record local people who were given food rations or other forms of payment distributed from the temple.  
H. 9 cm; W. 13 cm

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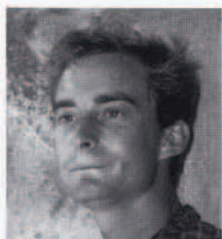
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