

The high desert cliffs in the background loom over the dig house at Abydos.



# The Dig House at Abydos

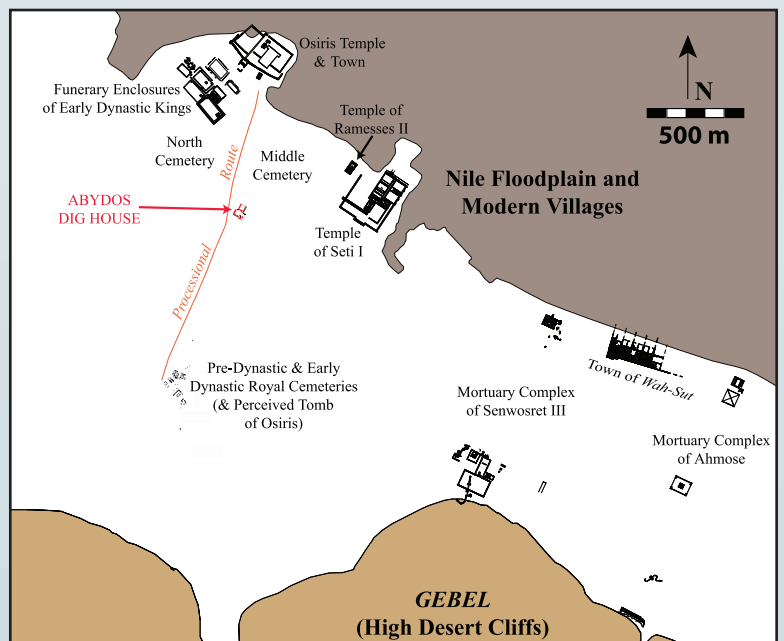
BY NICHOLAS  
S. PICARDO

**D**URING THE LATTER part of ancient Egypt's Middle Kingdom in the 18th century BCE, a royal edict forbade the placement of structures within a sacred zone at the Upper (Southern) Egyptian site of Abydos. As translated by Anthony Leahy:

made for himself within this holy place, he shall be reported and this law applied to him and to the necropolis-guard . . .

The area governed by this prohibition included a processional route that ran from the fringes of the Nile River Valley through a *wadi* (a shallow dry valley) toward the desert at the foot of the high cliffs of the Sahara. This landscape once

My Majesty (life, prosperity, health) decrees the protection of the holy land south of Abydos for his father, Wepwawet, forbidding anyone to trespass . . . Two stelae are to be set up on its South and two on its North . . . As for anyone who shall be found within these stelae, except for a priest about his duties, he shall be burnt. Moreover, as for any official who shall cause a tomb to be



Nicholas S. Picardo (top), Josef Wagner and Nicholas S. Picardo (bottom)

witnessed a yearly ceremonial reenactment commemorating the myth of Osiris, the Egyptian god of the Afterlife/Underworld and patron deity of Abydos. The Egyptians believed that Osiris' tomb lay at the desert end of the *wadi* with the temple of Osiris located at the other end near the floodplain's edge. Egyptian pilgrims visited Abydos to participate in the yearly festival procession between the two, depositing votive items or erecting small chapels where permissible to sustain their annual participation by proxy.

In modern times, Egyptologists from several American institutions—most with current or past ties to the Penn Museum—make their own journeys to Abydos to pursue archaeological research. Operating under the auspices of the Pennsylvania-Yale-Institute of Fine Arts, New York University Expedition, they gather at “the dig house,” the Expedition's research and housing facility that is the primary base for Penn's Egyptological research at Abydos (see *Expedition* volumes 11(1), 21(2), and 48(2)). It is also one of few structures to have been situated in the processional *wadi* since the ancient zoning restriction of almost four millennia ago.

During the 1967–68 field seasons at North Abydos, Expedition co-directors William Kelly Simpson (Yale University) and David B. O'Connor (then University of

Pennsylvania, now Institute of Fine Arts, New York University) recognized the urgent need for both an on-site residence and a storage facility to contain the large volume of artifacts being recovered from the “Portal Temple” of King Ramesses II. They were granted permission by the Egypt Antiquities Organization (now the Supreme Council of Antiquities) to establish a new house on the same grounds of a previous structure built for Egyptologist John Garstang in 1907. Although the Egypt Exploration Fund/Society used this facility through the 1950s, by 1967 much of it had collapsed and was dilapidated beyond repair.

Having outlined the foundation trenches himself, David O'Connor supervised construction of the house in two major phases in 1967–68. He preferred local suppliers, builders, and craftsmen over non-local contractors. The first delivery of 10,000 locally manufactured mud bricks arrived on a caravan of ten camels, each carrying a thousand.

The design of the house—actually more of a compound—partially followed that of the field house at Buhen, a Nubian site in the northern Sudan where O'Connor had worked previously. Architectural hallmarks adopted by the Abydos complex included mud-brick walls with whitewashed plaster facing and rooms oriented around rectangular courtyards



John Garstang practices his golf swing (1907) in the desert outside the field house formerly located on the site of the current compound. Photo courtesy of the School of Archaeology, Classics, and Egyptology, University of Liverpool.



Before construction could begin in 1967, ruins of the previous structure were removed (top). Afterward, mud-brick architecture was used to construct the new dig house (middle), with wooden rafters supporting the flat roofs (bottom).

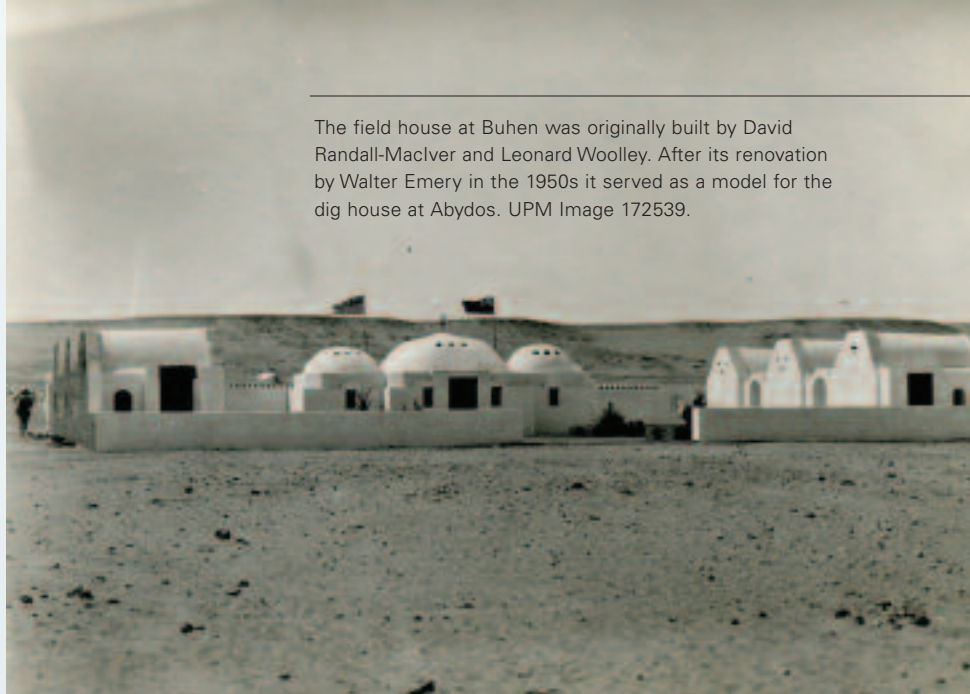
containing large planters. Domed rooms, designed to allow heat to rise and control temperatures, serve as bedrooms (most double occupancy). However, with temperatures regularly surpassing 100°F during the summer months, it is not uncommon for tenants to move their light, reed-built beds to a courtyard or to slumber on rooftops.

The house's original plan included front and back courtyards with eight bedrooms—five with domes plus three without, including quarters for house staff—a storage magazine, kitchen, dining room, and workroom. The year 1991 brought the addition of a larger workroom. Also new to the immediate west of the house that year was the “sherd yard,” an outdoor, grid-divided space where ceramicists and students spend countless hours sorting and analyzing tons (literally) of pottery vessels and fragments retrieved by excavations.

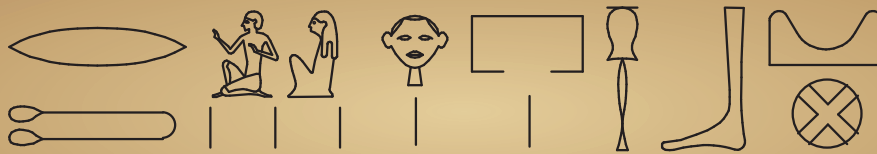
Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities approved a more substantial renovation of the dig house in 2000. Matthew D. Adams (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University) and House Manager Ahmed Rageeb oversaw the construction of a new wing, creating a third courtyard with five new bedrooms, a new block of storage magazines, a conservation laboratory, a darkroom, new house staff living quarters, plus additions to the kitchen and sherd yard. The tireless and devoted house staff also expanded recreational options by contributing a new ping-pong table.

Wells have always ensured a potable water supply. While water once was drawn by hand pump from a well located outside house walls, an in-house well room with a mechanical pump was set up in 1991. For many who have worked at Abydos, however, plumbing was perhaps the most welcomed of additions in 2000. Older bathroom facilities are prominent in Abydos lore and are still oft-discussed aspects of dig-house life. Known to many as “the buckets,” the older facilities consisted of two outhouse-like chambers, each enclosing a cubic commode of wood and a toilet seat over a metal bucket. For some these contributed to a romanticized notion of rugged field life. For others they were the stuff of horror stories. Even the most rustic enthusiasts admit that the new restrooms of tile and porcelain fixtures are palatial by comparison. Though some regard new, indoor tiled showers similarly, others recall fondly their former incarnations: outdoor booths of woven reed walls and wooden pallet floors with solar-heated metal drums installed above to hold water.

The field house at Buhen was originally built by David Randall-Maclver and Leonard Woolley. After its renovation by Walter Emery in the 1950s it served as a model for the dig house at Abydos. UPM Image 172539.



Electrical wiring was absent prior to the 1990s but became a necessity for computer use. While bedrooms now benefit from electricity for lighting, until quite recently occupants of older rooms still relied on candles or (for the brave) kerosene lamps. Where previously the house's phone line—shared with a single switchboard in the local town of el-Arabah—was the only means of direct outside contact, Egyptian cellular phone networks have improved communication significantly, provided one subscribes to the right carrier and stands in one of few spots (such as the roof) where



Translation: "People at the House of Abydos"

## THE PENNSYLVANIA—YALE—INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY EXPEDITION TO ABYDOS

Co-Directors: William Kelly Simpson (Yale University, Emeritus) and David B. O'Connor (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University)

The following active archaeological projects of the Abydos Expedition currently use the dig house as a base for their operations:

### ABYDOS SETTLEMENT SITE PROJECT

*Director:* Matthew D. Adams (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University)

### ABYDOS SURVEY FOR PALEOLITHIC SITES

*Co-Directors:* Deborah I. Olszewski (University of Pennsylvania), Harold L. Dibble (University of Pennsylvania), Shannon McPherron (Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology), and Jennifer R. Smith (Washington University)

### AHMOSE AND TETISHERI PROJECT, SOUTH ABYDOS

*Director:* Stephen P. Harvey

### EL-MAHÂSNA ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

*Co-Directors:* David A. Anderson (University of Pittsburgh) and David B. O'Connor (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University)

### NORTH ABYDOS PROJECT

*Director:* David B. O'Connor (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University), *Associate Director:* Matthew D. Adams (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University), and *Assistant Director:* Laurel Bestock (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University).

### NORTH ABYDOS VOTIVE ZONE PROJECT

*Director:* Mary-Ann Pouls Wegner (University of Toronto)

### SENWOSRET III PROJECT, SOUTH ABYDOS

*Director:* Josef Wegner (University of Pennsylvania)

### UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN ABYDOS MIDDLE CEMETERY PROJECT

*Director:* Janet E. Richards (University of Michigan)



The newest wing of the dig house was constructed in 2000. Since reinforced concrete has become the preferred building material in Egyptian villages, it was a difficult task to locate masons to build the house's new domes.

In all, construction of the new wing has increased the dig house's capacity by about a third. Abydos can now accommodate about 30 visiting project members, thus reducing the chances of anyone having to bed down in a storage-room-turned-bunkhouse. This was aptly timed, as recent and forthcoming years have and will constitute some of the most active periods of archaeological study at Abydos. 🏠

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#### For Further Reading

Kemp, Barry J. "Abydos." In *Excavating in Egypt: The Egypt Exploration Society 1882–1982*, edited by T. G. H. James, pp. 71–88. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

reception is reliable. Very recently, installation of high-speed internet wiring has made e-mail possible.

Even as technological advancements have eased the sense of isolation inherent to several months' time in the desert, some traditions of field life continue to evoke fondness and nostalgia for most who have resided at the dig house: after-dinner drinks on the roof at sunset; observing passing satellites, meteor showers, and lunar eclipses in an almost impossibly clear nighttime sky; inevitable defeat in table tennis at the hands of the permanent house staff; Friday hikes in the desert cliffs; dune sledding; and visits by the cats invariably "adopted" by the house to control rodents and make the compound less appealing to the region's lethal indigenous snakes.

The front courtyard—one of the older two—is still a hub of social activity at the dig house.

Leahy, Anthony. "A Protective Measure at Abydos." *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 75 (1989):41–60.

O'Connor, David B. *The Sacred Landscape of Abydos: Royal Cults and the Mysteries of Osiris*. London: Thames & Hudson, forthcoming.

Simpson, William Kelly. *The Terrace of the Great God at Abydos*. New Haven, CT and Philadelphia, PA: The Peabody Museum of Natural History of Yale University and The University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, 1974.

