ABYDOS and the University Museum: 1898-1969

By DAVID O’CONNOR

After its formation in 1887 the University Museum rapidly developed its role in the exploration of extinct and living cultures in many parts of the world, to the extent that it is now one of the leading institutions engaged in historical, anthropological and archaeological research. Now, at this crucial point in the Museum’s history when a major physical expansion is being accompanied by further and more far-reaching developments in the Museum’s educative and research roles, it is appropriate that the Winter 1970 exhibition ABYDOS IN EGYPT AND THE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM: 1898-1969 illustrates some aspects of both past and present activities. For the theme of this exhibition is not only the significance of this major site to the Egyptians, but also the Museum’s continuing role, since 1898, in the discovery of that significance.

The University Museum at a very early date became active in the exploration of two of the most ancient literate societies known, those of Egypt and Mesopotamia. One facet of this activity was its financial support, from 1898 to 1912, of the excavation at Abydos in Southern Egypt of the Egypt Research Account (later the Egypt Exploration Fund, and finally the Egypt Exploration Society), a society which then had branches in England and America. These excavations were opened by Flinders Petrie, thus associating the Museum with the beginnings of scientifically controlled and recorded archaeology in Egypt, and from the work of Petrie and others a steady stream of objects, of great historical and at times aesthetic interest, entered the Museum’s collections.

Subsequently the Museum developed its own field-work programme at other sites, but in 1967 renewed its association with Abydos when a combined expedition of the University Museum and Yale University commenced excavations there. Three seasons’ work have now been carried out and more are planned; already we have discovered most important new facts about Egyptian activity at Abydos while, as a result of a division with the Egyptian Museum in April of this year, much of the new material found has been added to the collections of the University Museum and the Peabody Museum at Yale. This material, with that acquired earlier, forms the basis of our current exhibition.

Abydos lies 250 miles south of Cairo and its ruins (including extensive cemeteries, temple and town remains) cover an area measuring approximately four by two miles on the low desert at the edge of the cultivation. Situated some six miles from the river, the main communication route in ancient times, Abydos was not administratively or economically important, but as a religious center it was of great significance to the Egyptians. This significance, originally due to the fact that Abydos was the burial place of the kings of the First Dynasty (ca. 3100-2890 B.C.) (and of perhaps two of the Second), the earliest historic rulers of Egypt, increased later when Abydos became a major cult-center of the god Osiris.

The First Dynasty originated in Southern Egypt and succeeded in uniting the northern and southern parts of the country. Under its rule the characteristic conceptual and material forms of Egyptian culture rapidly developed but, although modern scholarship know of these kings from later textual references, the location of their tombs and the nature of Early Dynastic culture (comparable in its significance to that of the Royal Tombs of Ur) remained unknown until...
Petrie’s excavations at Abydos seventy years ago.

Petrie’s work was not the first at Abydos, for from 1858 to 1866 Auguste Mariette had excavated extensively there on behalf of the Egyptian Government. Unfortunately Mariette, an enormously active man, was simultaneously excavating other sites and creating the nucleus of the Egyptian Museum and Antiquities Service. He was often away from Abydos and his records (many unpublished) leave much to be desired. The memoirs of acquaintances of Mariette and Petrie provide a telling contrast between the two men. Mariette was often to be found in his house near Cairo, zestfully writing up his research while dandling a child on his knee and surrounded by the bedlam of a house filled with his wife, children, servants, and thirty monkeys kept as pets. Sometimes he would leave for Cairo to defend his antiquities policies before his patron, the Khedive, or for Upper Egypt, when one of his foremen telegraphed news of a particularly exciting discovery. Petrie could be seen devoting himself, with equal zest, single-mindedly to the excavation and recording of a single site, while he and his staff lived in stark simplicity. John Wilson has recently quoted one observer of a Petrie camp:

"In a trough down the center of the table stood a double row of tins containing various kinds of food, and nearby a can opener. His [Petrie's] idea of satisfying the pangs of hunger, when they became intense, was to eat from several tins at random until they were empty. He took it for granted that his staff would do the same. . . . Annie and Edward Quibell, as fellow members of one of Petrie's expeditions, became engaged while making each other through ptomaine poisoning."

The royal tombs at Abydos, lying far back in the desert, were excavated first not by Mariette but by a certain Emile Anselme, of whose work Petrie bitterly but accurately remarked: it was "a search in which whatever was not removed was deliberately and avowedly destroyed in order to enhance the intended profits of European speculators." Petrie's careful re-excavation has enabled scholars to show that these badly damaged structures originally consisted of a square, mud-brick superstructure, whitewashed and with a curving roof, and a substructure consisting of pits or chambers divided into brick-walled rooms. These rooms contained the royal burial and offerings of food, drink, vessels, furniture, clothing, and jewelry.

Amongst other striking objects the Museum now holds a carefully carved, dark stone stela of King Ka'a, the last king of the First Dynasty. Originally two such stelae were set up before each royal tomb, to serve as focus for the daily offering cult, while from the subsidiary burials of court ladies and other individuals which surrounded the royal tomb came smaller, cruder limestone stelae identifying the occupant. These are the earliest examples of the funerary stela which is a characteristic feature of later Egyptian culture. From the royal tombs come extremely precious historical documents, small inscribed labels in wood, bone, and ivory, each of which summarizes the principal events in a regnal year of a specific king; these are the earliest examples of written history from Egypt and mark the beginning of the Egyptian dynastic chronological system, one of the most stable and well-documented in the ancient Near East.

East of the royal tombs, and much closer to the cultivation, Petrie and other excavators explored a series of large, mud-brick enclosures of the First and Second Dynasties. Each enclo-
ancient myth he was originally an actual king of Egypt who was killed by his envious brother Seth and whose dismembered body was scattered throughout Egypt; (his head was supposedly buried at Abydos, and the standard of the Eighth Nome or province, in which Abydos lay, may represent its reliquary). Osiris' wife Isis and sister Nepthys re-assembled and mumified the corpse; hence he is always depicted as wrapped in linen, like a mummy, although he wears a crown and grasps the crook and flail, insignia of kingship. Isis had miraculously conceived a son, Horus, who defeated Seth, was given Osiris' kingdom by the gods, and offered to his dead father his eye, torn out in the battle with Seth. This act revived Osiris and he was able to function as ruler of the dead.

After Abydos became one of its principal cult-centers an annual "mystery-play" re-enacting the myth was held there. It appears from textual references that the image of Osiris was carried out of its temple in a model ship, the Neshmet-ship, accompanied by a great procession of worshipers; at a certain point in the drama the murder of Osiris was reached, and he was carried to a place called "Pekef" to be buried. From at least the New Kingdom onwards, the site of the First Dynasty royal tombs was identified as "Pekef" and one of the tombs was actually refurbished as the "tomb" of Osiris! The participants then re-enacted the defeat of Seth and his evil allies and Osiris' image was carried back in triumph to his temple. Egyptians often made a kind of pilgrimage to be present at this festival, or at least to worship at Osiris' shrine, and one of the New Kingdom stelae found by the Pennsylvania-Yale Expedition in 1969 depicts the voyages of a New Kingdom official, on one side to Thebes to worship Amon and on the other (largely destroyed) side to Abydos to worship Osiris.

The myth of Osiris was also re-enacted in abbreviated form in the daily offering ritual in temples and at tombs in order to ensure the supernatural efficacy of the offering. More importantly for Abydos, all Egyptians wished to be closely associated with Osiris, for by identifying with his myth they too would be revived and enabled to function after death. Consequently in the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms many Egyptians were buried at Abydos and the Museum has in its collections many characteristic artefacts from these tombs.

A discovery of the Pennsylvania-Yale Expedition this year has made a major contribution to our understanding of Middle Kingdom (ca. 2000-1600 B.C.) cultic practices at Abydos. For the first two seasons of our work I was excavating in and around a small Ramesside structure, the so-called "Portal" of Ramesses II; in 1969, with my co-director Professor Simpson of Yale supervising the registration and facsimile-drawing of the artefacts, I was able to extend my excavations; the complete clearance of the badly destroyed "Portal" revealed that under it lay an extraordinary complex of fairly well-preserved mud-brick structures.

These proved to be small chapels, sometimes with forecourts and ancillary offering places, jammed closely together; they were not associated with any graves, but a few stelae remained in situ in their niches (others were found loose in the debris) and these contained funerary formulae and names of definite Middle Kingdom type. One fragment, unfortunately not in situ, even bore the name of Amenemhet III of the Twelfth Dynasty. The stelae varied in quality from a magnificent quartzite stela dedicated to an official called Ankhru to small limestone stelae inscribed in ink in hieroglyphic or hieratic. It seems they were set up, possibly at different times by members of the same family, to commemorate visits to Osiris' temple, which stood nearby. The existence of such commemorative chapels has often been surmised, and examples appear to have been encountered before, but ours are probably the best preserved and recorded group yet found.

Another Middle Kingdom object of some importance which we discovered scattered in many pieces in the ruins of the Ramesside structure (in which it had been re-used) was a relief scene of good quality depicting Amenemhet III of the Twelfth Dynasty offering to an unidentified god or gods. This scene may have come from the badly destroyed Middle Kingdom temple excavated nearby by Petrie. It is included in the current exhibition.
As in the Old and Middle Kingdoms, the New Kingdom rulers showed great interest in Abydos and carried out extensive building projects there. The Osiris myth had obvious implications for the Egyptian kingship, in which legitimacy of descent was of great importance, and each Egyptian king was anxious to demonstrate his devotion to Osiris, into whom his ancestors had been subsumed. Akhenaten I of the Eighteenth Dynasty erected a large cenotaph or imitation tomb in southern Abydos (near two similar royal structures of Twelfth Dynasty date), and other Eighteenth Dynasty kings enlarged and rebuilt the main temple of Osiris.

While the Pennsylvania-Yale Expedition has not yet encountered much Eighteenth Dynasty material in its present area, one extremely important discovery of this period was made. In the foundations of the Rameses II "Portal" were a number of re-used inscribed blocks from a temple of Akhenaten, the famous and so-called "heretic" king; it is unlikely that these blocks were brought from outside Abydos, and therefore is a rare proof that Akhenaten built temples at places other than Amarna and Thebes. Readers of Expedition will remember that Ray W. Smith is directing a University Museum investigation of the dismantled Akhenaten temple at Thebes, the blocks from which are very similar to our Abydos examples.

The "Portal" of Rameses II is but a small manifestation of the Nineteenth Dynasty's activities at Abydos; to the south, outside of our present concession, lie the enormous temples built by Seti I and Rameses II to display their special devotion to Osiris, temples which are primary sources for the art of the period. Nevertheless, the "Portal," badly destroyed as it is, is of considerable interest. It is in fact a small temple, of unusual form, overlooking the site of the main Osiris temple; in it we found the fragments of a well-preserved colossal royal head which is displayed in the current exhibition. A number of ostraca found in the ruins are concerned with the actual building of the temple and quarry marks can be seen on a number of the exposed blocks. The Middle Kingdom cenotaphs underlay the greater part of the temple, but excavations in the forecourt have revealed on the south a pre-temple stratified sequence and on the north a post-temple stratified sequence. Readers may be surprised to learn that these deposits, together with those found
in Koen es Sultan (see below), are the first vertically stratified remains to be recorded at Abydos since Petrie’s work in the temple enclosure in 1902 to 1903! Egyptologists for many years have tended to avoid such material, and it is only in the last few years that the importance of vertical stratigraphy in Egypt has come to be appreciated.

Throughout the New Kingdom many private individuals continued to be buried at Abydos, and objects from their tombs are well represented in the Museum’s collections. Amongst them is the striking statue of Siptepu of the Eighteenth Dynasty, an important official of the Eighth Nome, which serves to remind us that as well as having a general religious importance Abydos was also a provincial cemetery and that from the inscriptions of the officials buried there we gain considerable information about the Egyptian administrative system at different periods.

The Pennsylvania-Yale Expedition has also discovered a number of New Kingdom stelae, of considerable variety in quality, of which the most impressive is the tomb lintel of a late New Kingdom individual called Anhib-eridit. We also excavated an intact tomb, with nine burials, of the later New Kingdom, situated immediately north
of the "Portal." Although the coffins were badly decayed, the characteristic funerary equipment of canopic jars, pottery shawabitis (funerary figurines), and amulets was found in situ.

Amongst the smaller objects found in the general debris, two unusual categories of artefacts were numerous—mud figurines of rams' heads, vultures, cobras, and crocodiles, and many sherds of bowls which originally had figures of gods and hieroglyphic and hieratic texts painted on the interiors. These presumably votive objects are unique in that they have never before been found in a controlled excavation in Egypt. Duplicate material in the collections of the British and Leyden Museums provides an interesting link with the past, for it came originally from the Anastasi collection. Giovanni Anastasi was an early nineteenth century merchant in Egypt, who sold to European museums great quantities of antiquities collected for him in Upper and Lower Egypt by agents who were clearly responsible for some of the chaotic conditions we encountered in our excavations.

Abydos continued to be an important site into Ptolemaic and Roman times, although gradually Phile, at the First Cataract, came to overshadow it as an Osirian cult center. The latest material encountered to date by the Pennsylvania-Yale Expedition is within the "Kom es Sultan" or "Mound of the Sultan." This is a walled addition to the northwest corner of the main temple enclosure, which is itself defined by a massive brick wall. The remains of the town which once surrounded the temples are better preserved within "Kom es Sultan" than elsewhere, and our excavations have revealed well-preserved house remains and stratification. Those remains found so far are quite late, but they run under the main enclosure wall, which is of a characteristic type found at several sites and dated till now rather vaguely as "post-Rameside." The sherds and carbon associated with the remains should, after study, help to define this date more closely. Underneath the presently excavated strata are yet others and further work may carry us back to much earlier times.

A trial trench made on the outer (eastern) face of the "Kom es Sultan" mound had to cut through great quantities of loose debris before reaching stratified remains, so that definite results have not yet emerged. From the debris however came many ostraca written in demotic, the cursive script of the later first millennium B.C., which will give us valuable information about some of the activities occurring at Abydos at that period.

The hundreds of objects of many different kinds found throughout the first three seasons and the problems of analyzing their significance have prompted us to develop, in conjunction with the Near Eastern Section of the Museum, a computer program which can be used to rapidly arrange our data in possibly significant patterns of material, shape, provenance, etc. This is a new development in Egyptology and it is appropriate that, like Petrie's original work, it should be associated with the University Museum.

Abydos was never completely abandoned, even after the pagan gods had fallen into disrepute and neglect amongst the Christianised Egyptians. An ironic footnote to the history of the site is, in fact, provided by the small but ancient church of Saint Damiana, which is still in use and is surrounded by a thriving Christian village. Village and church are built within one of the five-thousand-year-old brick royal enclosures of the First or Second Dynasty described above, which is now therefore inaccessible to the archaeologist.

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