

ABYDOS

One of the most renowned sites in ancient Egypt. Situated on the left bank of the Nile about 7 miles (11 km) from the town of al-Balyana, it was reputed to be the repository of the head of Osiris. For this reason, it was much frequented as a place of pilgrimage, as is shown by the inscriptions and graffiti in the temple of Seti I, called Osireion in the Egyptian period and the Memnonion in the Hellenistic period. In the Christian era, the temple was very soon inhabited by Christian ascetics, of which we have both [archaeological](#) and literary testimony.

Archaeological and Literary Evidence

The pharaonic tombs are numerous, for in ancient Egypt it was desirable to have one's tomb, or at least a cenotaph, close to that of Osiris. We may distinguish first of all the tombs that were laid out behind the pharaonic temple. Evidence of their habitation by Christians has been noted by some authors (Peet, 1914, pp. 49-53; [Archaeological Report](#), 1908-1909; 1911-1912, pp. 8-9).

[Caves](#) have been fitted up in the Darb al-Jir, a track leading to the Kharjah Oasis in the Libyan mountains [Daressy, 1898, pp. 282- 84; Lady Petrie's contribution of "The Coptic Hermitage at Abydos" (1925); Badawy (1953) gives a synthesis of the preceding documents in his article "Les Premiers etablissements," pp. 69-70].

Abydos, Egypt - Wikipedia

The temple of Seti I was occupied by a community of women, as is shown by the graffiti published by W. E. Crum (Murray, 1904, pp. 39-42). The whole was examined and completed by Piankoff (1958- 1960, pp. 125-49). The most recent graffiti date from the tenth century.

The region of Abydos is named in the Life of the martyr monks PANINE

AND PANEU (Orlandi, 1978, pp. 95-115). The Life attests that monasticism was present at Abydos at least from the fifth century. Thereafter we have no evidence until the sixth-century Life of Moses, who founded a monastery at Abydos. His Life is published only in part (Amélineau, 1886, 1888, pp. 680-706, 826-27; Till, 1936, pp. 46-81; Munier, 1916, pp. 53-54; see also Campagnano, 1970, pp. 223-46). This Life testifies that Moses founded two religious houses at Abydos, one for men to the south of the temple of Seti I, the other for women at a place unknown.

We have some testimonies about two monasteries situated at Abydos to the south of the temple of Seti I. The Jesuit C. Sicard (1982, p. 68) saw the ruins of a monastery that he calls “of Pachomius” (see DAYR ANBA BAKHUM). That was perhaps the remains of the monastery founded by Saint Moses. Its ruins are called by Lefebvre “the monastery of the Greeks” (1911, pp. 239-40). In Arabic there is no great difference between Dayr Bakhum and Dayr al-Rum, but we do not know who of the two may have been mistaken.

To the northwest of the ancient temple of Osiris there is today a monastery sometimes called DAYR SITT DIMYANAH and sometimes that of Saint Moses (see DAYR ABU MUSA).

Abydos Temples

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Buildings

Abydos is one of the oldest and holiest places of pharaonic Egypt, for according to the old religion, here Osiris was buried and here he rose again from the dead. The area therefore served from earliest Egyptian

times as a necropolis (Kaiser, 1979, pp. 162-63). In addition, several kings erected large cenotaphs for themselves there.

The real main temple of the place has not survived (on the few remains, see Kemp, 1968). On the other hand, the great temple of Seti I, with the cenotaph of this king (the so-called Osireion), is still standing. It is one of the best-preserved New Kingdom temples.

Until well into the Christian period, the temple was a bulwark of paganism (Piankoff, 1958-1960, pp. 128-31). It was only Moses of al-Balyana who, at the beginning of the sixth century, brought about its end. To all appearance, however, the temple did not undergo any real Christianization. Nevertheless, there are Christian inscriptions and graffiti in several rooms. The larger service room on the west side of the so-called Butchers' Hall, in the south wing of the temple, is studded with Coptic inscriptions. This room appears to have taken on a new cultic significance in Christian times, but its purpose is not beyond dispute. At any rate, there are no indications of its conversion into a church. The content of the inscriptions implies that the room was particularly frequented by women and Christian nuns, which points to the existence of a convent in the neighborhood (Crum, in Murray, 1904, pp. 38-43). These inscriptions extend down to the tenth century A.D. In the area of the first temple court, behind the pylon, numerous late Roman architectural fragments were found. If there was a church in this temple, it can only have stood in this court.

Remains of a settlement in late antiquity have also been preserved on the top of the *kom* (mound) a few hundred yards northeast of the Seti temple, at the place where today stands the rest house of the Egyptian [Antiquities Organization](#) (EAO). We can recognize some traces of streets and a larger building that shows an extended inner court. The buildings as a whole are built of mud bricks. The thickness of the walls and the staircases that can be seen at several places indicate that the majority of the buildings were two-storied.

During the construction of the EAO rest house, the ruins of a church, probably a basilica, were found (unpublished). Isolated shafts of columns and several large capitals of limestone still lie in the surrounding fields. Some of them, for the adornment of the rest house terrace, were set up on the parapet of the wall.

A weaving mill from the [early Christian](#) period, perhaps of the seventh century A.D., with several pieces of Byzantine workmanship, was discovered to the south of the temple in the marketplace of the present-day village of 'Arabah al-Madfunah.

There are also a few hermits' [caves](#) in the neighborhood of Abydos. These subterranean grave structures from the pharaonic period are approached by an outside staircase; with the addition of a few [niches](#) and benches, they were converted for living purposes. Some of these hermits' caves (e.g., Chapel D 68; Peet, 1914, fig. 14) have inscriptions and modest paintings.

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