

EXCAVATIONS AT ABYDOS

THE GREAT POOL AND THE TOMB OF OSIRIS

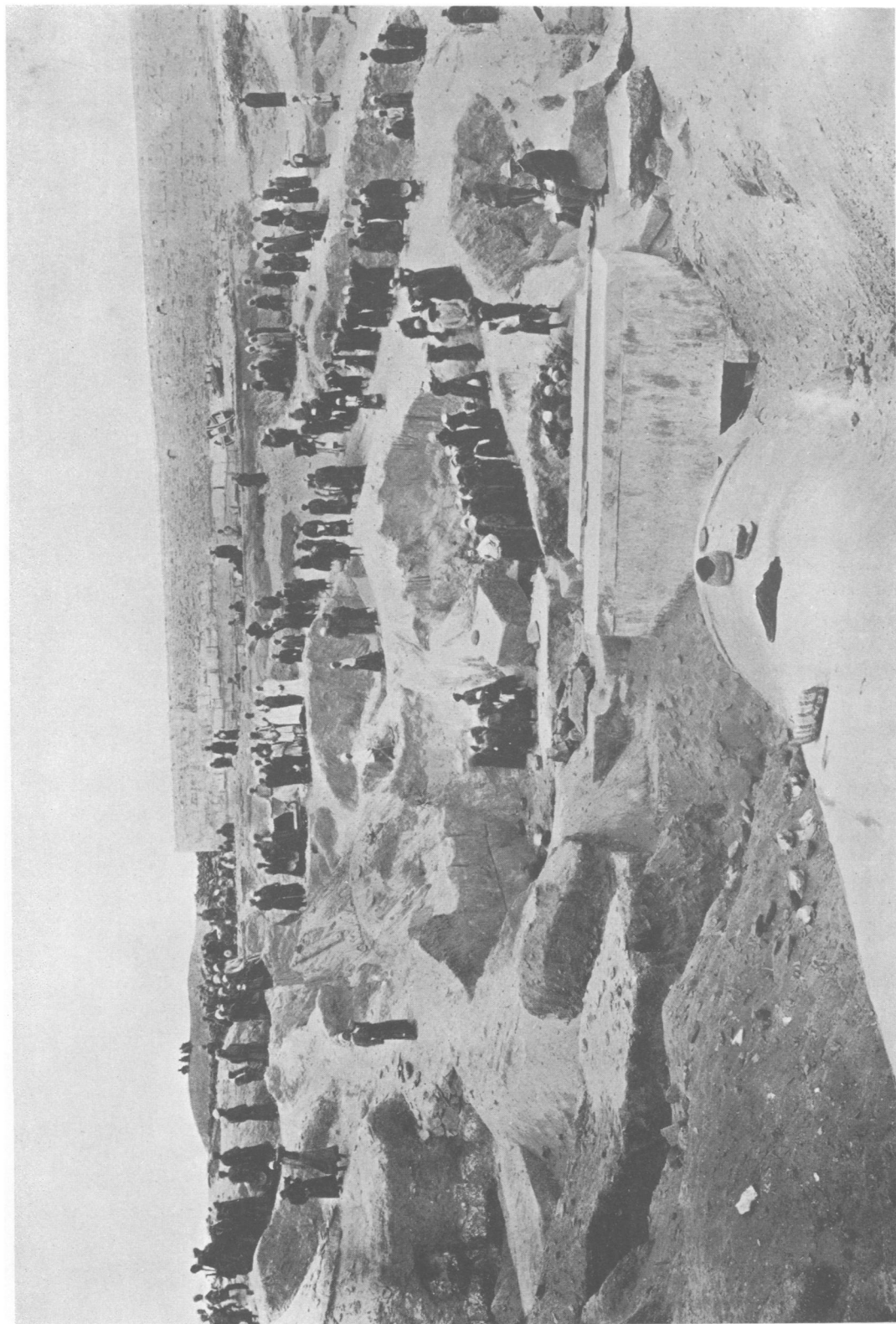
BY PROFESSOR EDOUARD NAVILLE, D.C.L., LL.D., F.S.A.

[See Plates XVIII—XXI]

THE excavations of last winter made at the so-called Osireion have given quite unexpected results. When the party of excavators, consisting of the present writer, Professor Thomas Whittemore, the representative of our American subscribers, Mr Wainwright and Mr Gibson, settled in the two brick houses in the desert above Arâbat el-Madfûna, we hoped that we should find some construction connected with the worship of Osiris. As is stated in the paper on Abydos which appeared in the first number of this *Journal* (January 1914), what seemed most probable, judging from what we had already found, was that we should enter a passage leading underneath the temple of Seti I to a *Ka* sanctuary of Osiris. We could not imagine that we should discover an edifice quite unique, at least at present, for we do not know what future excavators may bring to light.

We began work on Christmas-eve and went on uninterruptedly for eleven weeks. From the commencement it seemed necessary to work on a large scale or no success could have been hoped for. We began with more than four hundred men and boys; by degrees the number grew, and we ended with over six hundred labourers, four-fifths of whom were boys. It was by no means difficult to get the men we wanted. The very low Nile of last summer, the lowest known for more than fifty years, had left many acres of land absolutely barren. The people had no work to do in the fields and were very eager to find employment with us. The first day saw a regular fight with crowds of men, who all wanted to have their names put down by our writer. The subscribers to the Fund will be glad to know that, besides the important archaeological results, which their money has been the means of producing, the wages paid have been a great boon to a large number of families in Arâbat el-Madfûna, Beni Manşûr and other villages in the neighbourhood of our excavations.

Our work lasted just long enough to permit of our uncovering the whole area of the building. During the last week of our work we discovered the two staircases going down to the water, which we shall describe later, an important find since it plainly showed the purpose for which the edifice was built. When we stopped, the clearing away of the rubbish from the building was nearly finished, and we now had to deal with heavy stones, for the removal of which the large number of boys, who had been so necessary in carrying away the accumulations of sand with baskets, were



The Beginning of the Work: January 1914.

quite useless. We needed tackle and machinery for the moving of the big blocks of fallen stones; these will be necessary for the completion of the work next winter.

In 1912 we had cleared the passage, the door of which had been discovered by Miss Murray in 1902-3¹; we had found that it sloped gently, that its walls were covered with inscriptions from the Book of the Dead, and that it was about forty-five feet in length. When we reached the end we saw on both sides wide openings looking like chambers, and in front a huge monolithic lintel fifteen feet long. It seemed at first to be an entrance to another passage, but we soon perceived that it was an opening in a stone wall twelve feet thick. This wall separates the two rooms which we had first reached from other rooms which we thought we could trace in the direction of the temple of Seti. On the southern side we went further than on the northern, and we dug down to the bottom of what we believed to be the southern room. Then also we had uncovered a small part of the enclosure wall and we had noticed that it was made of enormous stones very well joined and reminding one of the masonry of the so-called temple of the Sphinx. Such is the description and the interpretation we gave in 1912 of what we had found.

We began work where we had stopped in 1912, using two lines of railway, one on each side of our excavation. The northern one, which was ready only a few days after the other, was a gravitation railway, arranged by Mr Gibson, on which the cars were pulled up by a rope passing over the wooden wheel of a *sak'yeh*, by means of which we carried off enormous quantities of sand.

We started from the eastern side of the big lintel and traced the enclosure wall on both sides. It was first found on the south side and there we understood how it was made. It is so enormous, being about twenty feet in width, that standing over it we imagined that it was the ceiling of a large chamber, but we soon noticed that it was nothing but a wall made of two different kinds of stone. The outer casing is limestone rather roughly worked, the inner casing is very beautiful masonry made of a red stone looking like quartzite, but which the geologist Dr Hume told us is a hard sandstone coming probably from the neighbourhood of Assuan. These very fine blocks are joined together by beautiful dovetails made of black granite.

We followed up that wall and soon found that it had been terribly damaged, the limestone having evidently been used for making lime and the red sandstone for building purposes. On the northern side the enclosure wall is made of the same beautiful masonry (Pl. XXI. Fig. 2), with here and there large knobs used in moving these huge blocks. On this side, the wall is well preserved throughout its whole length at its original height; the top layer, on which the granite blocks rested, which formed the ceiling of the northern aisle, is still in its place (Plate XIX). On the southern side the destruction is far greater. At a short distance from the corner the three top layers of the red wall have been taken away and the limestone as well. Occasionally quantities of chips were witnesses of the use which had been made of these blocks.

In front of the doorway (C) in the middle, nearly in a line with the doorposts, there appeared two huge square granite blocks, which were recognized to be pillars, so that it was clear that the space between the two enclosure walls, 20 metres (60 feet) in

¹ See Egyptian Research Account: *The Osireion*, by MARGARET A. MURRAY, Pls. XV and XVI.



General View of the Great Pool, from the south.

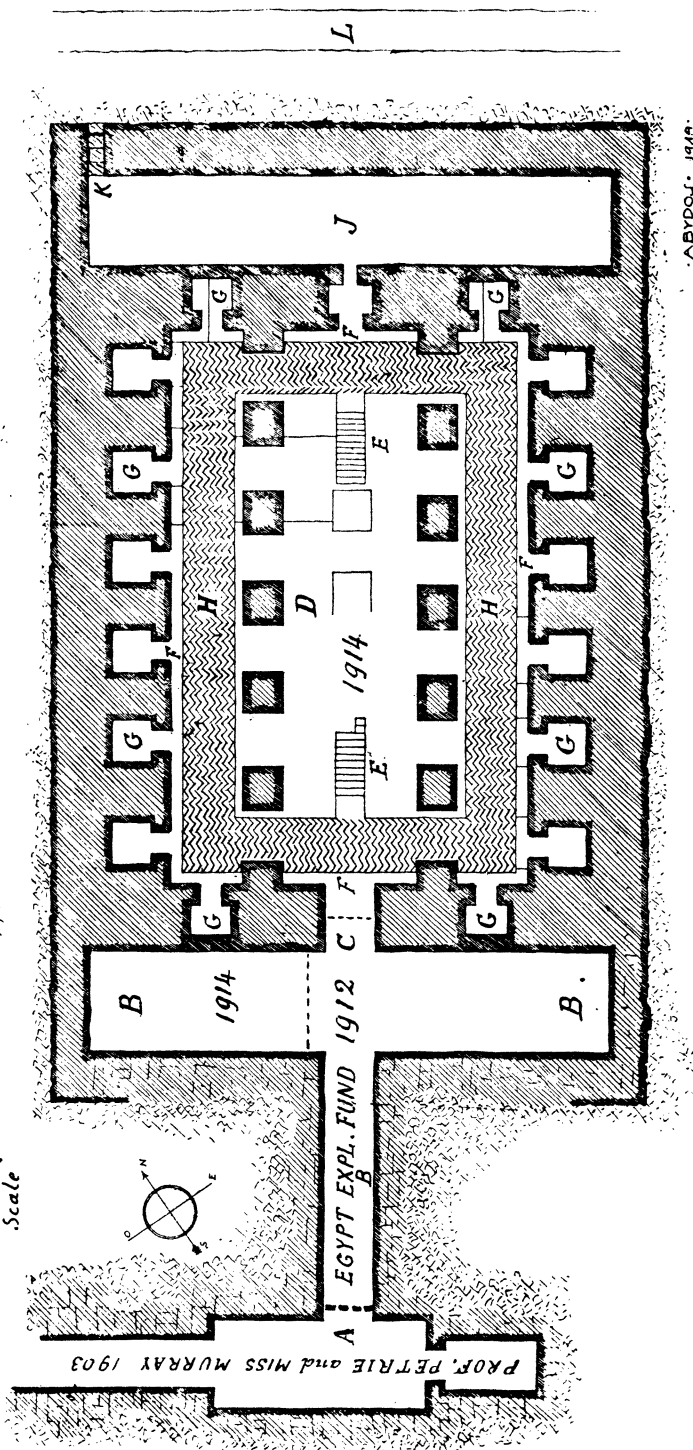
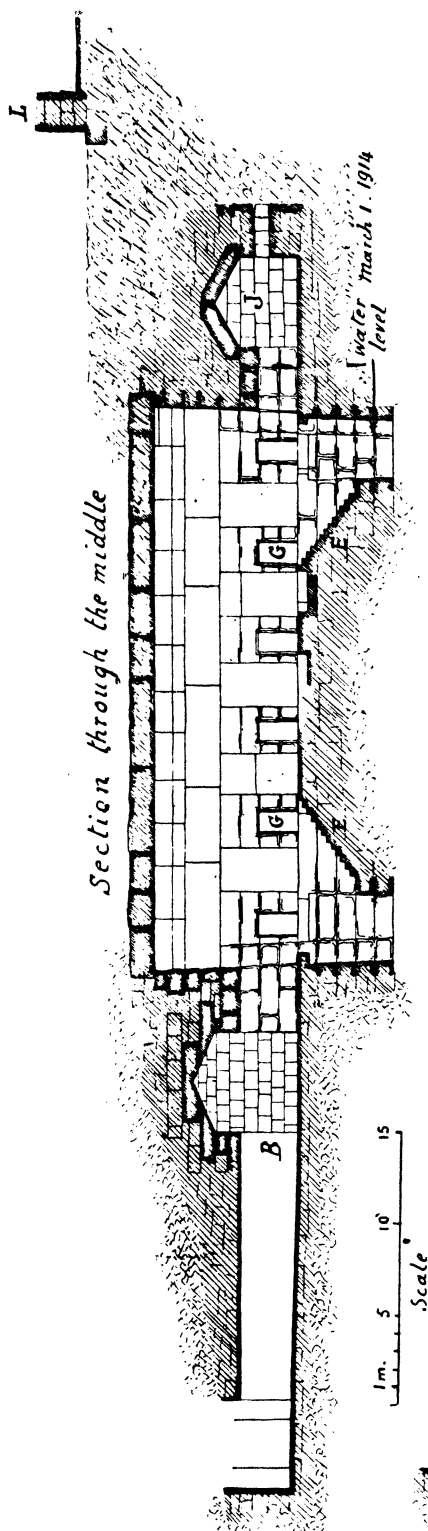
width, was divided into three aisles by two rows of pillars. The question was, how far did this construction go? was it only a kind of vestibule? should we have to push under the temple of Seti? These were the problems which confronted us in the second week in January, when the photograph on Pl. XVIII was made by a Swiss artist, M. de Mestral.

While working in front of the doorway towards the temple of Seti, we dug also into the space behind it, between the end of the passage cleared in 1912 and the wall in which the doorway is built (B). What was considered at first as being two separate chambers turned out to be a large hall with a ceiling made on the principle often used. It consists in layers of stones resting on the walls and projecting over each other from both sides so as to meet in the middle and thus make a complete roof. Afterwards they were cut from the inside, either in the form of an arch, as we can see at Deir el-Bahari, or quite flat as it is here. The flat surface seems to us to have been chosen because it was easier to place on it the paintings which covered not the ceilings only, but also the side walls. These paintings are representations of parts of the Book of the Dead and were made for Menephtah. On the remains of the ceiling are to be seen the arms of the sky-goddess. This is what may be called Menephtah's chamber; the date of its construction is doubtful, but the upper layers of the masonry are of Silsileh sandstone, which clearly indicates the XIXth Dynasty. What was there in front of the doorway at the time of the early dynasties when the pool was built? We cannot tell. Probably Menephtah made this chamber in order to have at the entrance a chamber quite symmetrical with that of Osiris at the other end, and which he might consider as his own. This is probably the reason why he adorned it with texts bearing his name. It looks as if he had cut away part of the thick wall on the east side so as to lay upon it the stones of a ceiling. This chamber will require further research. I should not wonder if it was found that the hall and chamber discovered by Professor Petrie and Miss Murray, called by them the Osireion, and the passage which we cleared in 1912 were all the work of Menephtah, and connected with the large chamber we discovered. The whole would be the sanctuary of Menephtah, the Menephteum.

In front of the doorway we went forward. Pillar after pillar appeared, chiefly on the north side, and also fragments of architraves, which we had to support with iron bars where they were broken. The inside of the construction is entirely made of granite, of which a great number of fragments constantly occurred, and delayed the process of clearing. We could not, at first, go very deep; we were already fifteen feet below surface-level, and we were, besides, especially in the middle of the building, working in pure sand, which was constantly falling in. On the north side, where the enclosure wall was in good preservation, we did not at the beginning go deeper than the third layer of stones.

On January 28 we came upon a thick block of granite, which seemed to rest merely on sand; it lay across the space between the enclosure wall and the pillars, and was evidently part of the ceiling. We succeeded in creeping underneath and entered what was considered at first to be a room built of enormous blocks, some of which are more than fifteen feet long, with a very fine ceiling of granite: there was something like an opening on the south side.

During the following days we reached the top of the end wall in the middle: it has sculptures representing the King Menephtah worshipping Osiris and the gods of



PLAN OF THE GREAT POOL AND OF THE TOMB OF OSIRIS

- A. Descending Passage, Hall and Chamber, discovered by Professor Petrie and Miss M. A. Murray in 1903.
 B. Passage and Chamber of Menephtah, discovered by Professor Naville and Mr T. Eric Peet in 1912.
 C. Doorway.
 D. Central Nave.
 E. Stairs leading to the water.
 F. Ledge.
 G. Cells.
 H. Water.
 I. Tomb of Osiris.
 J. Hole made by robbers.
 K. Wall of Seti's Temple.

Heliopolis, Tum and Harmachis. Thus we had arrived at the end of the building at the close of the sixth week and could now dig deeper and find out the whole plan of construction.

Naturally we began by calling it a sanctuary, but when we got below the level of the basement of the pillars we recognized the nature of the building. In the south-western corner appeared the first of the niches made on the four sides, and of which there are seventeen (G).

The whole construction consists of a rectangle about one hundred feet long and sixty wide. Its orientation is not exactly East-West, as may be seen from the plan. It seems to have been constructed according to the nature of the soil and of the line of the desert which is nearly parallel to the river. Therefore, though it is not strictly accurate, we shall have to take the names of the cardinal points as the Arabs do at Abydos. East is the side of the Nile, West that of the desert, South is Upper Egypt, North the direction of the Delta. The building is below the level of the great Temple but not underneath it, for from the outside of the enclosure wall to that of the Temple (L) there is a space of about eight metres.

The enclosed space consists of three divisions of unequal width. The middle one, which we can call the nave (D), is the widest, and is separated from the lateral aisles by two rows of five huge pillars which supported large granite architraves, on which and on the enclosure wall rested the ceiling made of granite monoliths. These cannot be called slabs, for each stone is more than six feet thick and their weight is enormous. This ceiling is preserved only in one place at the east end of the northern aisle (see Pl. XX and Pl. XXI, Fig. 2). When we had reached this point we thought we were in a chamber. We crept under the block which was in the middle of the passage. Behind it the sand did not reach as high as the ceiling, and on the right side we could see an opening under what looked like a lintel, but on digging deeper we saw that it was not a door but only the interval between two pillars. What seemed to be a lintel was the huge architrave of granite.

Though the bottom was not reached until some time afterwards, we could already admire the magnificent masonry and the enormous size of the stones. In the south aisle the ceiling is nearly completely destroyed, two blocks only remaining, two fragments of the last stone (see Pl. XX), and though they were partly resting on the enclosure wall, one of them had to be held in position by means of an iron hook.

The deeper we went the more we could see how savage the destruction had been on the south side. The magnificent granite blocks have been used as a very convenient quarry. Everywhere can be seen the marks of the wedges with which the stones have been split. Mill-stones in great number have been made of various sizes; some quite small, and larger ones weighing seven or eight tons, of the same kind as those still used for oil presses. Three unfinished ones lie there. It is quite possible that the destruction is not of very ancient date. A great number of drawings due to Copts, especially boats which may have a religious meaning, are found at nearly all heights. Some of them show that the building must have been intact in their time.

In digging below the third layer of masonry we reached the cells which are all round the building (GG); they are seventeen in number, six being on each long side of the rectangle, and are all alike in the red stone casing, though their ceilings are



sometimes in limestone. As is the case throughout the whole building, they have no ornament or inscription of any kind, and they remind one of the chambers in the pyramids.

The first discovered is that in the long side of the south-western corner (see Pl. XXI, Fig. 1). Very soon two others appeared on the same side. This induced us to search in the other aisle where we found similar ones of exactly the same dimensions, so we very soon came to the conclusion that there were such cells on the four sides of the building. We discovered all of them; most had been preserved intact, those only on the long side of the southern aisle are a good deal destroyed, having lost part of their ceilings. These cells are over six feet high, about six feet wide and deep, and had doors, probably of wood, of one leaf, which turned in two holes still visible in the stonework.

In the middle of the end wall there is a cell, the doorway of which is exactly like the rest. When we entered it we saw that the back wall had been broken through and that it gave access to a large chamber (J) wider than the rectangular building. It was quite empty except for a heap of sand in the north-eastern corner. When this sand was cleared away we found that it came from a hole dug there (K), evidently by robbers, as is the case in many tombs in Egypt.

This chamber is perfectly preserved, but there was much moisture and even mud on the floor. Its ceiling is pointed, being composed of slabs leaning against each other. It is covered with sculptures in low relief bearing the cartouche of Seti I. The complete darkness of the room and the height of the ceiling made it difficult to ascertain the subject of these carvings, but Mr Gibson succeeded in taking photographs by flashlight which show a very curious representation of the sky-goddess, Nut, supported by the god Shu. She has a disk on her toe, a winged scarab is flying along her leg, and she kisses a winged disk which seems to have come out of her mouth.

The inscriptions are in the style of a calendar, and may refer to the rising of some star. The other representations are, as far as I could judge, clearly funerary, like those found in the tombs of the kings. This seems to show that the chamber was the tomb of Osiris, in which his head was supposed to be preserved. Next year, when we shall have the necessary contrivances for giving a good light, we shall know better what these sculptures represent.

The carvings outside on the end wall point to the same conclusion. There are several rows of sculptures showing King Menephtah worshipping Osiris and other gods. In the middle vertical line are seen the two principal amulets put near the dead, the  and the  buckle.

On the granite architrave of the southern side are also funerary inscriptions with the same king's name, for instance, part of ch. 148 of the Book of the Dead, the chapter of the seven cows and the four oars. Three of the cows only are sculptured, and Osiris is shown there, as in a Berlin papyrus, with the hawk's head.

Here the same question arises as for the chamber of Menephtah. When was this chamber of Osiris made? It does not seem contemporaneous with the rest of the building. One can imagine that the funerary chamber of Osiris may have had a small door like those of the cells, so that nothing revealed the place where the god



Eastern End of the Great Hall: shewing entrance to the "Tomb of Osiris."



Fig. 1. The South-West corner of the Great Pool: shewing cyclopean walls.



Fig. 2. The North-East corner of the Great Pool: shewing the well-preserved masonry of the North Wall.

was entombed and was to be concealed. But evidently the back wall of that cell has been broken through so as to make an entrance which was blocked afterwards with stones. If from the beginning a chamber was to be made there, behind the cells, it is hardly to be supposed that this particular one would have been built completely in order to have its wall broken through afterwards. The construction of this chamber seems to have been a change made in Seti's time, probably when he built his temple. Before leaving we closed it with bricks in order to protect it against the bats.

Until we reached the floor on which the granite pillars rest, we fully believed that this peculiar construction was a temple or sanctuary of some kind. It could hardly be expected that there would not be a floor in front of the cells, and our surprise was great when we found that the cells opened on a ledge (F) about three feet wide, and that this was also the case before the doorway and the entrance to the tomb. This ledge is not a mere external addition; it is formed by the extension, beyond the face of the walls, of the enormous stones which go as far back as the end of the cells and on which they rest. These stones have been shaped on the under side and project over the water. Under the ledge, and flush with the outer wall of the cells, the beautiful masonry goes down to a depth of which we are as yet ignorant. This ledge runs down both sides of the lateral aisles and also at both ends of the centre nave, but is not found in front of the four half-pillars which are in a line with the two colonnades.

In digging in three places we found water, at a depth of four metres below the floor of the cells, which was then the level of the infiltration water in the cultivated land. This year the Nile was exceptionally low; in a normal year the water would come very near the ledge which is below the cultivated land. The masonry may perhaps go another four metres below the present level of the water.

Thus there is no doubt that the four sides of the rectangle form a pool, a pool with porches, the ceilings of which were made of enormous monoliths supported by architraves and pillars of equally gigantic proportions. The ceilings were probably made in order to prevent evaporation; the water was stored there and remained.

We could not dig down to the bottom of the pool, because everywhere we were stopped by blocks of stone, chiefly granite, which had been thrown into the water. Next winter we shall have to raise them, because it is not impossible that statues may have been thrown in also, as was the case in the so-called temple of the Sphinx, where the statues of Chefredjep were found in a well. These statues, if there were any, would have stood in the centre nave which has a floor made of large stones on which the pillars have been raised.

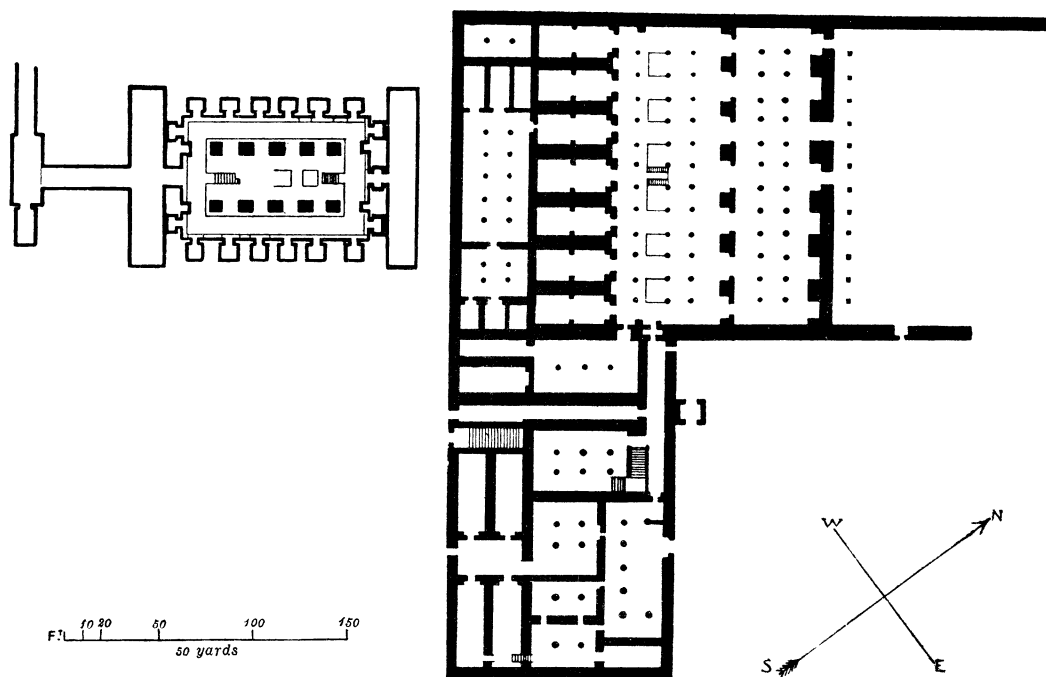
This middle platform is an island; it could be reached only by a boat or a bridge. We could not completely clear its floor because of the heap of stones piled upon it; however, we did clear enough of it to discover the two staircases going down from it to the water. The lowest step is at present about one metre above the water, which in ordinary years would cover three or four steps. Above the eastern staircase we found two little square basins, probably used by people for washing their feet.

The centre nave is a massive block built of enormous stones; it evidently goes as deep down as the outer walls.

The question of its ceiling is still doubtful. It seems probable that there was one immediately in front of the end wall. There we see the stones of the lateral

colonnades projecting over the sculptured wall. This clearly points to a ceiling, but we do not know yet if it extended over the whole length.


In spite of the ruined state of the great pool, it is impossible not to be struck by its majestic simplicity. It has all the characteristics of a very old construction. There is hardly one person who, after having seen it, did not say at once that it was very similar to the temple of the Sphinx. It is of exactly the same style of architecture and masonry, and the same absence of ornament of any kind, but its proportions are larger than those of the temple of the Sphinx. In the latter the granite pillars are only three feet square, at Abydos they are eight and a half, the architraves are in proportion to the pillars and the whole construction is verily what is called cyclopean.



THE GREAT POOL AND THE SETI TEMPLE

I have no hesitation in putting the date of its erection to the time of the Old Empire, the IVth Dynasty, when the temple of the Sphinx was built, and perhaps even earlier. It is not impossible that this is the oldest Egyptian building, of large proportions, which has been preserved.

There is no doubt that it is the construction known as "Strabo's Well," which the geographer says was below the temple, built like the labyrinth but on a smaller scale, with passages covered by a single stone.

I cannot dwell here on the various questions raised by the discovery of this monument, some of which may be solved by the excavations of next winter. It seems likely that it had something to do with the worship of Osiris. The cells remind us of the  *sebkhet* in the celestial house of Osiris where there are twenty-two of them, as we learn from the Book of the Dead. Renouf calls them *pylons*;

I think the word *cell* conveys better the true meaning, since they had inhabitants. Was the sacred boat of Osiris ever towed on the pool? This would explain the presence of the ledge; since the boats of the gods were always towed by rope, the ledge would be the path for the priests who did the towing.

Was the water supposed to have a curative effect, and were the cells built for the use of people who came to have their broken health restored?

These are questions connected with the worship, but there are others concerning the water itself. Where did it come from? The word of Strabo, *κρήνη*, may be either a 'well' or a 'spring.' Strabo speaks of a canal connecting it with the river. It is quite possible we may find it. Certainly there must have been something special in that place, for one can hardly understand the Egyptians making such an enormous construction merely for infiltration water. They must have known very well the laws of the rise and fall of the river, and also of the subterranean sheet of water which is said to flow under the desert, as well as under the cultivated land, the so-called underground Nile which the hydraulic engineers of the present day are studying, and trying to use for the fertilization of the land. It would be most interesting if one could find out what was the level of the subterranean water four thousand years ago.

If, as I believe, this pool is one of the oldest constructions in Egypt, it is curious that it is neither a temple nor a tomb, but a hydraulic work.

These remarks give an idea of the manifold questions which arise from the discovery of the pool at Abydos. It is all the more desirable that the Fund should be in a position next winter to finish this important work which we warmly recommend to the interest and the generosity of the friends of Old Egypt.