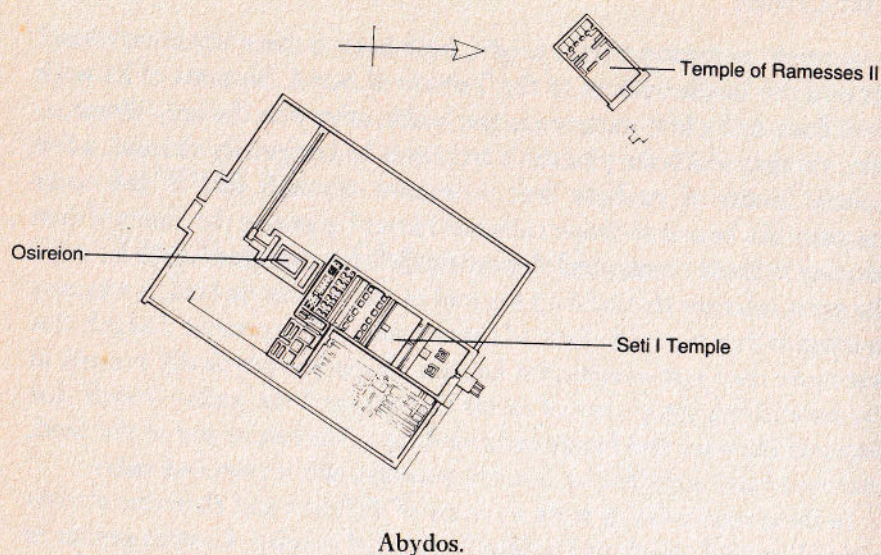




think about it – what kind of crown was it that radiated heat and caused the skin to haemorrhage and break out in pustulant sores?

Seventeen centuries of kings

I walked on into the deeper darkness, eventually finding my way to the Gallery of the Kings. It led off from the eastern edge of the inner Hypostyle Hall about 200 feet from the entrance to the temple.

To pass through the Gallery was to pass through time itself. On the wall to my left was a list of 120 of the gods of Ancient Egypt, together with the names of their principal sanctuaries. On my right, covering an area of perhaps ten feet by six feet, were the names of the 76 pharaohs who had preceded Seti I to the throne; each name was carved in hieroglyphs inside an oval cartouche.

This tableau was known as the 'Abydos King List'. Glowing with colours of molten gold, it was designed to be read from left to right and was divided into five vertical and three horizontal registers. It covered a grand expanse of almost 1700 years, beginning around 3000 BC with the reign of

Menes, first king of the First Dynasty, and ending with Seti's own reign around 1300 BC. At the extreme left stood two figures exquisitely carved in high relief: Seti and his young son, the future Ramesses II.

Hypogeum

Belonging to the same class of historical documents as the Turin Papyrus and the Palermo Stone, the list spoke eloquently of the continuity of tradition. An inherent part of that tradition, was the belief or memory of a First Time, long, long ago, when the gods had ruled in Egypt. Principal among those gods was Osiris, and it was therefore appropriate that the Gallery of the Kings should provide access to a second corridor, leading to the rear of the temple where a marvellous building was located – one associated with Osiris from the beginning of written records in Egypt⁹ and described by the Greek geographer Strabo (who visited Abydos in the first century BC) as 'a remarkable structure built of solid stone . . . [containing] a spring which lies at a great depth, so that one descends to it down vaulted galleries made of monoliths of surpassing size and workmanship. There is a canal leading to the place from the great river . . .'¹⁰

A few hundred years after Strabo's visit, when the religion of Ancient Egypt had been supplanted by the new cult of Christianity, the silt of the river and the sands of the desert began to drift into the Osirion, filling it foot by foot, century by century, until its upright monoliths and huge lintels were buried and forgotten. And so it remained, out of sight and out of mind, until the beginning of the twentieth century, when the archaeologists Flinders Petrie and Margaret Murray began excavations. In their 1903 season of digging they uncovered parts of a hall and passageway, lying in the desert about 200 feet south-west of the Seti I Temple and built in the recognizable architectural style of the Nineteenth Dynasty. However, sandwiched between these remains and the rear of the Temple, they also found unmistakable signs that 'a large underground building' lay concealed.¹¹ 'This hypogeum', wrote Margaret Murray, 'appears to Professor Petrie to be the place that Strabo mentions, usually called Strabo's Well.'¹² This was good guesswork on the part of Petrie and Murray. Shortage of cash, however, meant that their theory of a buried building was not tested until the digging season of 1912–13. Then, under the direction of Professor Naville of the Egypt Exploration Fund, a long

transverse chamber was cleared, at the end of which, to the north-east, was found a massive stone gateway made up of cyclopean blocks of granite and sandstone.

The next season, 1913–14, Naville and his team returned with 600 local helpers and diligently cleared the whole of the huge underground building:

What we discovered [Naville wrote] is a gigantic construction of about 100 feet in length and 60 in width, built with the most enormous stones that may be seen in Egypt. In the four sides of the enclosure walls are cells, 17 in number, of the height of a man and without ornamentation of any kind. The building itself is divided into three naves, the middle one being wider than those of the sides; the division is produced by two colonnades made of huge granite monoliths supporting architraves of equal size.¹³

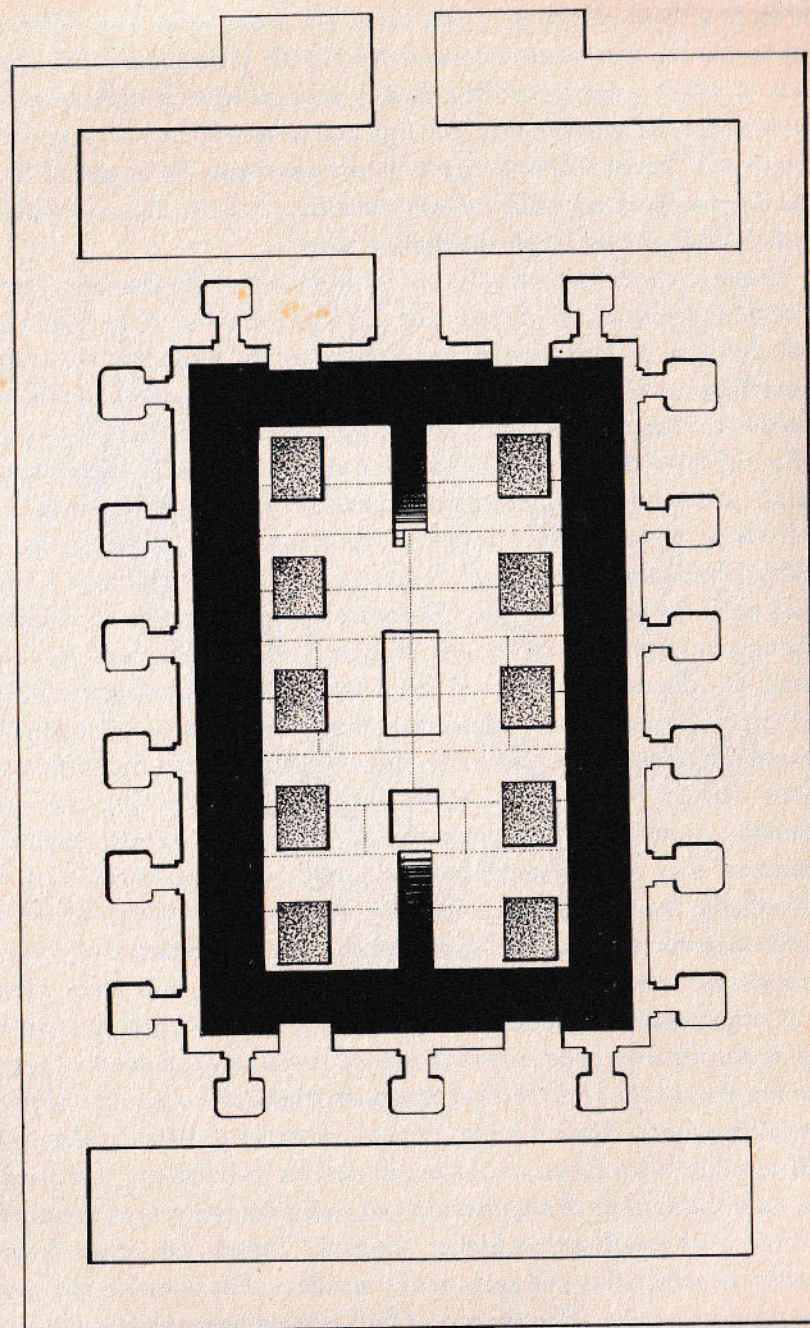
Naville commented with some astonishment on one block he measured in the corner of the building's northern nave, a block more than twenty-five feet long.¹⁴ Equally surprising was the fact that the cells cut into the enclosure walls had no floors, but turned out, as the excavations went deeper, to be filled with increasingly moist sand and earth:

The cells are connected by a narrow ledge between two and three feet wide; there is a ledge also on the opposite side of the nave, but no floor at all, and in digging to a depth of 12 feet we reached infiltrated water. Even below the great gateway there is no floor, and when there was water in front of it the cells were probably reached with a small boat.¹⁵

The most ancient stone building in Egypt

Water, water, everywhere – this seemed to be the theme of the Osireion, which lay at the bottom of the huge crater Naville and his men had excavated in 1914. It was positioned some 50 feet below the level of the floor of the Seti I Temple, almost flush with the water-table, and was approached by a modern stairway curving down to the south-east. Having descended this stairway, I passed under the hulking lintel slabs of the great gateway Naville (and Strabo) had described and crossed a narrow wooden footbridge – again modern – which brought me to a large sandstone plinth.

Measuring about 80 feet in length by 40 in width, this plinth was composed of enormous paving blocks and was entirely surrounded by water. Two pools, one rectangular and the other square, had been cut into the plinth along the centre of its long axis and at either end stairways led



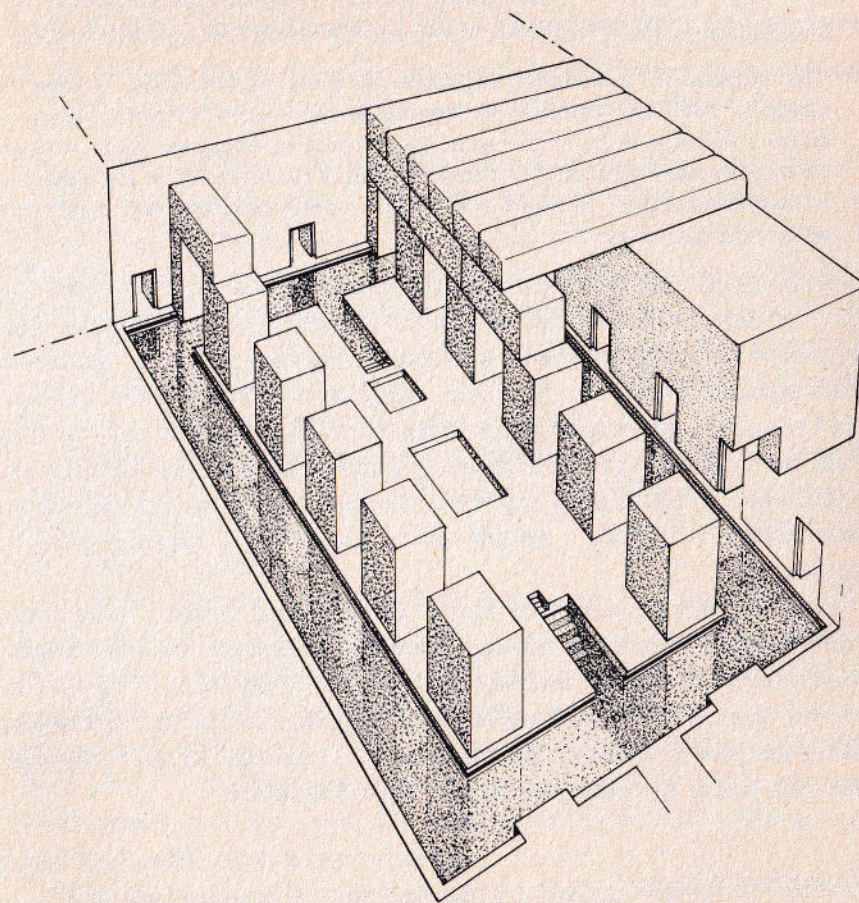
Plan of the Osireion.

down to a depth of about 12 feet below the water level. The plinth also supported the two massive colonnades Naville mentioned in his report, each of which consisted of five chunky rose-coloured granite monoliths about eight feet square by 12 feet high and weighing, on average, around 100 tons.¹⁶ The tops of these huge columns were spanned by granite lintels and there was evidence that the whole building had once been roofed over with a series of even larger monolithic slabs.¹⁷

To get a proper understanding of the structure of the Osireion, I found it helpful to raise myself directly above it in my mind's eye, so that I could look down on it. This exercise was assisted by the absence of the original roof which made it easier to envisage the whole edifice in plan. Also helpful was the fact that water had now seeped up to fill all of the building's pools, cells and channels to a depth of a few inches below the lip of the central plinth, as the original designers had apparently intended it should.¹⁸

Looking down in this manner, it was immediately apparent that the plinth formed a rectangular island, surrounded on all four sides by a water-filled moat about 10 feet wide. The moat was contained by an immense, rectangular enclosure wall, no less than 20 feet thick,¹⁹ made of very large blocks of red sandstone disposed in polygonal jigsaw-puzzle patterns. Into the huge thickness of this wall were set the 17 cells mentioned in Naville's report. Six lay to the east, six to the west, two to the south and three to the north. Off the central of the three northern cells lay a long transverse chamber, roofed with and composed of limestone. A similar transverse chamber, also of limestone but no longer with an intact roof, lay immediately south of the great gateway. Finally, the whole structure was enclosed within an outer wall of limestone, thus completing a sequence of inter-nested rectangles, i. e., from the outside in, wall, wall, moat, plinth.

Another notable and outstandingly unusual feature of the Osireion was that it was not even approximately aligned to the cardinal points. Instead, like the Way of the Dead at Teotihuacan in Mexico, it was oriented to the east of due north. Since Ancient Egypt had been a civilization that could and normally did achieve precise alignments for its buildings, it seemed to me improbable that this apparently skewed orientation was accidental. Moreover, although 50 feet higher, the Seti I Temple was oriented along exactly the same axis – and again not by accident. The question was: *which was the older building?* Had the axis of the Osireion been predetermined by the axis of the Temple or vice versa? This, it turned out, was an issue over



Reconstruction of the Osireion.

which considerable controversy, now long forgotten, had once raged. In a debate which had many connections with that surrounding the Sphinx and the Valley Temple at Giza, eminent archaeologists had initially argued that the Osireion was a building of truly immense antiquity, a view expressed by Professor Naville in the *London Times* of 17 March 1914:

This monument raises several important questions. As to its date, its great similarity with the Temple of the Sphinx [as the Valley Temple was then known] shows it to be of the same epoch when building was made with enormous stones without any ornament. This is characteristic of the oldest architecture in Egypt. I should even say that we may call it the most ancient stone building in Egypt.²⁰

Describing himself as overawed by the 'grandeur and stern simplicity' of the monument's central hall, with its remarkable granite monoliths, and by 'the power of those ancients who could bring from a distance and move such gigantic blocks', Naville made a suggestion concerning the function the Osireion might originally have been intended to serve: 'Evidently this huge construction was a large reservoir where water was stored during the high Nile . . . It is curious that what we may consider as a beginning in architecture is neither a temple nor a tomb, but a gigantic pool, a waterwork . . .'²¹

Curious indeed, and well worth investigating further; something Naville hoped to do the following season. Unfortunately, the First World War intervened and no archaeology could be undertaken in Egypt for several years. As a result, it was not until 1925 that the Egypt Exploration Fund was able to send out another mission, which was led not by Naville but by a young Egyptologist named Henry Frankfort.

Frankfort's facts

Later to enjoy great prestige and influence as professor of Pre-Classical Antiquity at the University of London, Frankfort spent several consecutive digging seasons re-clearing and thoroughly excavating the Osireion between 1925 and 1930. During the course of this work he made discoveries which, so far as he was concerned, 'settled the date of the building':

- 1 A granite dovetail in position at the top of the southern side of the main entrance to the central hall, which was inscribed with the

cartouche of Seti I.

- 2 A similar dovetail in position inside the eastern wall of the central hall.
- 3 Astronomical scenes and inscriptions by Seti I carved in relief on the ceiling of the northern transverse chamber.
- 4 The remains of similar scenes in the southern transverse chamber.
- 5 An ostrakon (piece of broken potsherd) found in the entrance passage and bearing the legend 'Seti is serviceable to Osiris'.²²

The reader will recall the lemming behaviour which led to a dramatic change of scholarly opinion about the antiquity of the Sphinx and the Valley Temple (due to the discovery of a few statues and a single cartouche which seemed to imply some sort of connection with Khafre). Frankfort's finds at Abydos caused a similar *volte-face* over the antiquity of the Osireion. In 1914 it was 'the most ancient stone building in Egypt'. By 1933, it had been beamed forward in time to the reign of Seti I – around 1300 BC – whose cenotaph it was now believed to be.²³

Within a decade, the standard Egyptological texts began to print the attribution to Seti I as though it were a fact, verifiable by experience or observation. It is not a fact, however, merely Frankfort's interpretation of the evidence he had found.

The only facts are that certain inscriptions and decorations left by Seti appear in an otherwise completely anonymous structure. One plausible explanation is that the structure must have been built by Seti, as Frankfort proposed. The other possibility is that the half-hearted and scanty decorations, cartouches and inscriptions found by Frankfort could have been placed in the Osireion as part of a renovation and repair operation undertaken in Seti's time (implying that the structure was by then ancient, as Naville and others had proposed).

What are the merits of these mutually contradictory propositions which identify the Osireion as (a) the oldest building in Egypt, and (b) a relatively late New Kingdom structure?

Proposition (b) – that it is the cenotaph of Seti I – is the only attribution accepted by Egyptologists. On close inspection, however, it rests on the circumstantial evidence of the cartouches and inscriptions which prove nothing. Indeed part of this evidence appears to contradict Frankfort's case. The ostrakon bearing the legend 'Seti is serviceable to Osiris' sounds less like praise for the works of an original builder than praise for a restorer

who had renovated, and perhaps added to, an ancient structure identified with the First Time god Osiris. And another awkward little matter has also been overlooked. The south and north 'transverse chambers', which contain Seti I's detailed decorations and inscriptions, lie *outside* the twenty-foot-thick enclosure wall which so adamantly defines the huge, undecorated megalithic core of the building. This had raised the reasonable suspicion in Naville's mind (though Frankfort chose to ignore it) that the two chambers concerned were 'not contemporaneous with the rest of the building' but had been added much later during the reign of Seti I, 'probably when he built his own temple'.²⁴

To cut a long story short, therefore, everything about proposition (b) is based in one way or another on Frankfort's not necessarily infallible interpretation of various bits and pieces of possibly intrusive evidence.

Proposition (a) – that the core edifice of the Osireion had been built millennia before Seti's time – rests on the nature of the architecture itself. As Naville observed, the Osireion's similarity to the Valley Temple at Giza 'showed it to be of the same epoch when building was made with enormous stones'. Likewise, until the end of her life, Margaret Murray remained convinced that the Osireion was not a cenotaph at all (least of all Seti's). She said,

It was made for the celebration of the mysteries of Osiris, and so far is unique among all the surviving buildings of Egypt. It is clearly early, for the great blocks of which it is built are of the style of the Old Kingdom; the simplicity of the actual building also points to it being of that early date. The decoration was added by Seti I, who in that way laid claim to the building, but seeing how often a Pharaoh claimed the work of his predecessors by putting his name on it, this fact does not carry much weight. It is the style of the building, the type of the masonry, the tooling of the stone, and not the name of a king, which date a building in Egypt.²⁵

This was an admonition Frankfort might well have paid more attention to, for as he bemusedly observed of his 'cenotaph', 'It has to be admitted that no similar building is known from the Nineteenth Dynasty.'²⁶

Indeed it is not just a matter of the Nineteenth Dynasty. Apart from the Valley Temple and other cyclopean edifices on the Giza plateau, no other building remotely resembling the Osireion is known from *any* other epoch of Egypt's long history. This handful of supposedly Old Kingdom structures, built out of giant megaliths, seems to belong in a unique category. They resemble one another much more than they resemble any

other known style of architecture and in all cases there are question-marks over their identity.

Isn't this precisely what one would expect of buildings not erected by any historical pharaoh but dating back to prehistoric times? Doesn't it make sense of the mysterious way in which the Sphinx and the Valley Temple, and now the Osireion as well, seem to have become vaguely connected with the names of particular pharaohs (Khafre and Seti I), without ever yielding a single piece of evidence that clearly and unequivocally *proves* those pharaohs built the structures concerned? Aren't the tenuous links much more indicative of the work of restorers seeking to attach themselves to ancient and venerable monuments than of the original architects of those monuments – whoever they might have been and in whatever epoch they might have lived?

Setting sail across seas of sand and time

Before leaving Abydos, there was one other puzzle that I wanted to remind myself of. It lay buried in the desert, about a kilometre north-west of the Osireion, across sands littered with the rolling, cluttered tumuli of ancient graveyards.

Out among these cemeteries, many of which dated back to early dynastic and pre-dynastic times, the jackal gods Anubis and Upuaut had traditionally reigned supreme. Openers of the way, guardians of the spirits of the dead, I knew that they had played a central role in the mysteries of Osiris that had been enacted each year at Abydos – apparently throughout the span of Ancient Egyptian history.

It seemed to me that there was a sense in which they guarded the mysteries still. For what was the Osireion if was not a huge, unsolved mystery that deserved closer scrutiny than it has received from the scholars whose job it is to look into these matters? And what was the burial in the desert of twelve high-prowed, seagoing ships if not also a mystery that cried out, loudly, for solution?

It was the burial place of those ships I was now crossing the cemeteries of the jackal gods to see:

The Guardian, London, 21 December 1991: A fleet of 5000-year-old royal ships has been found buried eight miles from the Nile. American and Egyptian archaeologists discovered the 12 large wooden boats at Abydos . . . Experts