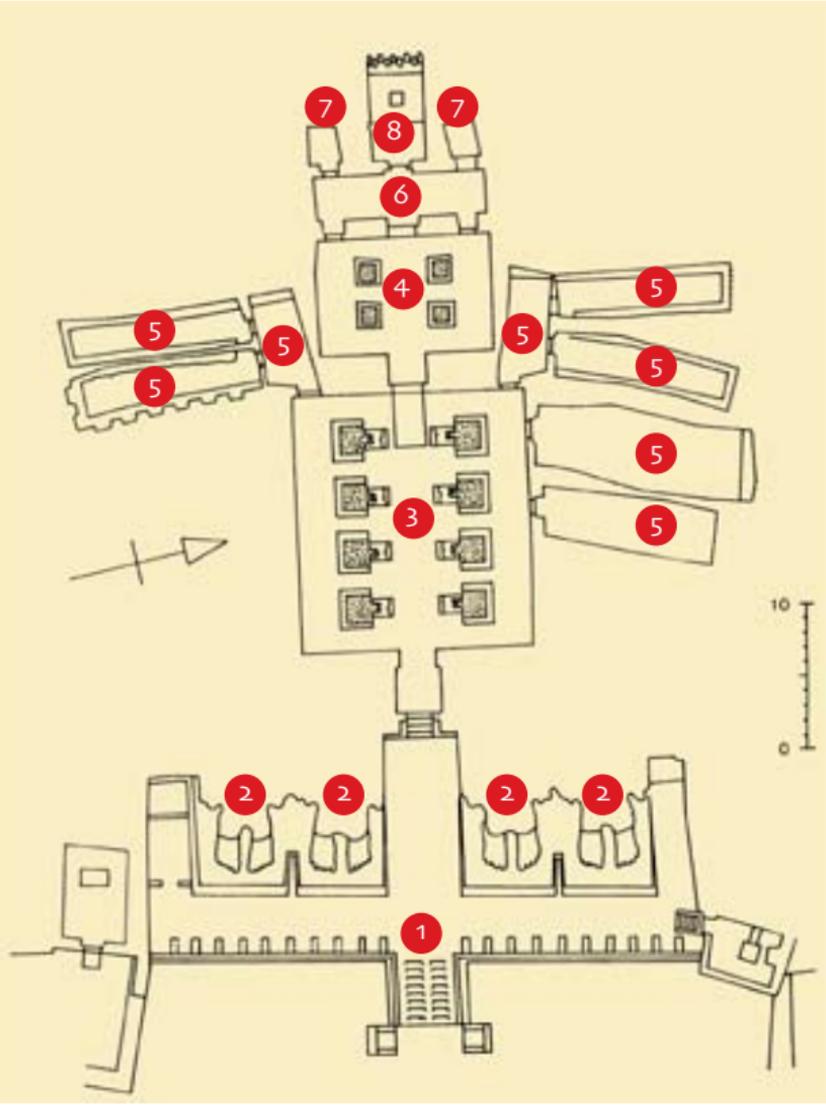


DISCOVERING OUR HERITAGE

THE TEMPLES OF ABU SIMBEL



TEXT BY KHALED EL-ENANY

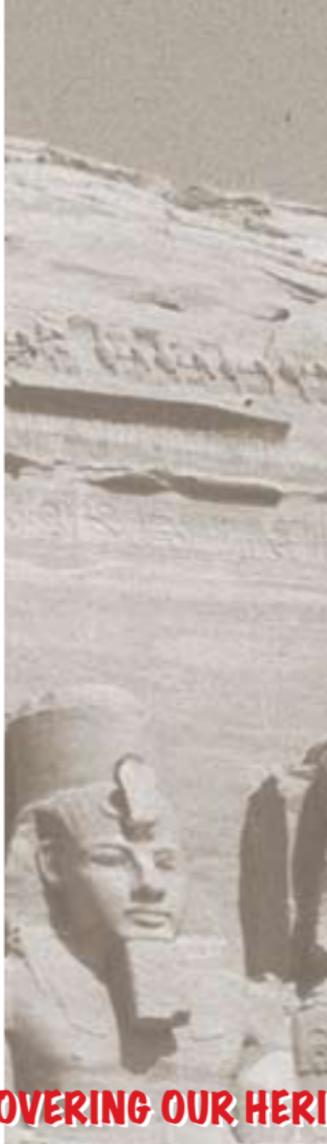


PLAN OF THE GREAT TEMPLE (RAMSES II)

[After Antike Welt, 1994, Abb. 89, p. 68].

خريطة المعبد الكبير (رامسيس الثاني)

- | | | | |
|---|---|------------------------------------|---|
| 1 | TERRACE | شرفة | ١ |
| 2 | ROYAL COLOSSI OF THE
FACADE-PYLON | التمثيل العملاقة للواجهة
-الصرح | ٢ |
| 3 | HALL WITH OSIRIAN
PILLARS | القاعة ذات الأعمدة
الاوزيرية | ٣ |
| 4 | SECOND HALL | الصالة الثانية | ٤ |
| 5 | NORTHERN AND
SOUTHERN ROOMS OF
TRESOR | حجرات الكنوز الشمالية
والجنوبية | ٥ |
| 6 | VESTIBULE | الردهة | ٦ |
| 7 | LATERAL ROOMS | حجرات جانبية | ٧ |
| 8 | SANCTUARY | قدس الاقداس | ٨ |

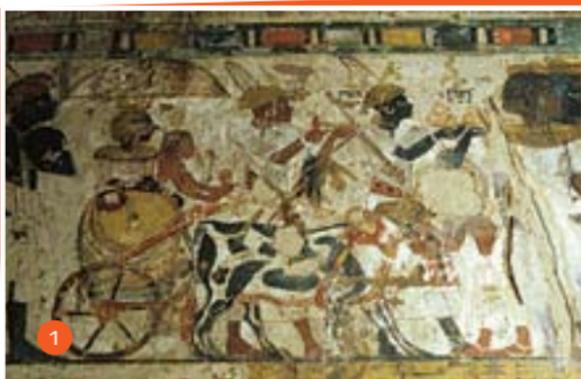


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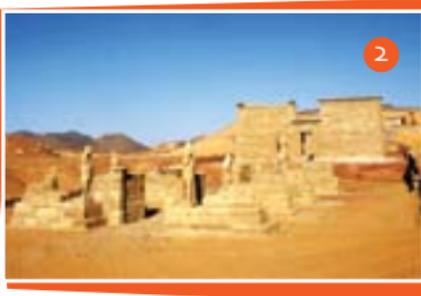
A BIT OF HISTORY



Nubia is the area south of the city of Aswan. It is divided into two regions. The first, located between the first two cataracts of the Nile, is Lower Nubia (Egyptian Nubia). The second, called Upper Nubia, extends from Wadi Halfa to northern Sudan around Khartoum (Sudanese Nubia).

Relations between Egypt and Nubia are as old as Egyptian history **1**. Nubia was an important source for trade. Not only were valuable products imported therefrom, such as gold, wood, ivory, incense and animal hides, but it also provided troops for the armies of the Pharaohs.

The oldest Nubian temples date back to the eighteenth dynasty (Buhen, al-Lessiya, Amada, etc.) while the most recent were erected during the Graeco-Roman period. However, of all the Egyptian Pharaohs, it was under Ramses II (thirteenth century BC) that Lower Nubia witnessed its most intensive period of temple construction. He erected seven temples therein : Beit al-Wali, Garf Hussein, Wadi al-Sebuâ **2**, Derr (the only one on the east bank of the Nile), those of Abu Simbel and, finally, Akcha. The successors of this great ruler of the nineteenth dynasty would not build another temple in Nubia for nearly a millennium to come.

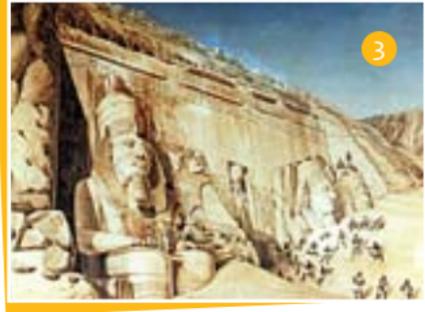


Abu Simbel lies 270 km south of Aswan. In addition to the two cave-temples built by Ramses II, the walls of the surrounding hills feature twenty-eight stelae carved into the rock.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE GREAT TEMPLE OF ABU SIMBEL

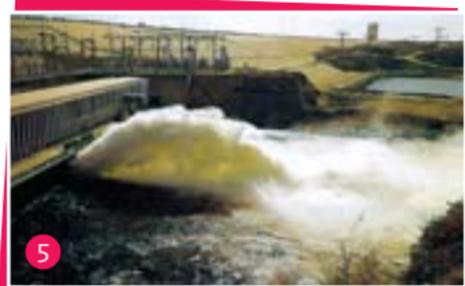
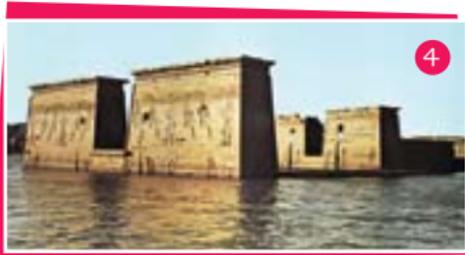
During his trip to Nubia, the Swiss traveller Johann Ludwig Burckhardt – also known as Sheikh Ibrahim ibn Abdallah – was the first Westerner to see « Ebsambal (=Abu Simbel) », on March 22, 1813. After visiting the small temple, he wandered a few tens of meters to the south, and discovered the upper part of the colossi of Ramses II of the Great Temple, still buried under the sand

3. Thereafter, the Italian Giovanni Battista Belzoni and his team managed to enter the Great Temple of Abu Simbel on Friday, August 1st, 1817, more than three millennia after its construction.



ABU SIMBEL THREATENED BY THE RISING WATERS OF THE NILE

After the construction of the old Aswan Dam (1898-1902) and its subsequent two elevations (1907-1912 and 1929-1934), the water level to the south of Aswan had risen considerably and the temples of Philae had been inundated 4. The construction of the High Dam (1960-1971) 5, and the huge Lake Nasser which would develop behind it – with an average width of over 10 km, length of 500 km and a total area greater than 6000 km² – would result in the complete submersion of the monuments of Nubia (in both Egypt and Sudan). It was therefore necessary to act quickly to save



these temples before they ultimately disappeared under the water (that is to say, before 1968 for the site of Abu Simbel). The Egyptian authorities and international community reacted quickly : on March 8, 1960, the General Director of UNESCO issued a solemn appeal, thus inaugurating the International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia. It would span twenty years.

The rescued Nubian temples were moved and re-assembled in new locations : the temples of Philae on the island of Agilika, near the old Aswan Dam ; the temples of Beit al-Wali, Kalabsha and the kiosk of Qertassi a few hundred meters south of the High Dam ; the temples of Wadi El-Sebuâ, Dakka and Maharraqa, 140 km south of the High Dam ; the temples of Amada, Derr and the tomb of Pennut, 180 km from the High Dam ; and the two temples of Abu Simbel, 270 km from the High Dam. Four Nubian temples were offered to countries that had provided significant assistance in the salvage operation : the temple of El-Lessiya to Italy ;



that of Debdod to Spain ; the temple of Taffa to the Netherlands ; and the temple of Dendur to the United States. Other monuments were offered to other participating

countries such as France, Poland, Germany, etc.

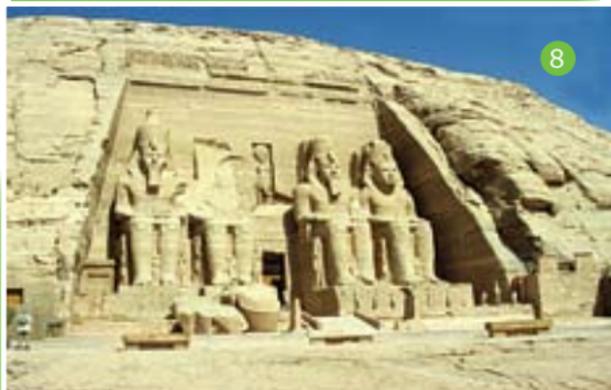
Several schemes had been presented to save the temples of Abu Simbel. The one which was selected in 1963 had been submitted by a Swedish company called VBB. The work cost



nearly 40 million USD. It took one year (August 1965 - July 1966) to cut the two temples into 1042 enormous blocks weighing over 15000 tons . The blocks were then re-assembled around a

concrete superstructure, surrounded by a dome to mimic the topography on which the temple was originally located, over 200 m north and 65 m above its original location. The new site was inaugurated on September 22, 1968, but work on the final elements lasted until 1972.

THE GREAT TEMPLE OF ABU SIMBEL



The Great Temple of Abu Simbel was completely carved out of the rock. Its facade, trapezoidal in form to mimic the pylon **8**, is preceded by a terrace decorated with a series of upright statues of Horus and Ramses II. The facade is adorned with four colossal statues **9** carved into the rock representing Ramses II seated and looking eastward. Around the king's legs are statues of queens **10**, princesses and princes. The facade is dominated by a row of baboons greeting the rising sun. Above the entrance is a niche containing a statue of hawk-headed god Ra-Horakhty **11**.

The entrance leads to a large hall, the ceiling of which rests on two rows of four Osirian pillars **12**. In this hall, the reliefs are exceptionally well preserved. The eastern reliefs represent two merely symmetric scenes of the Pharaoh smiting his enemies. On the northern wall, one can admire a detailed composition of the famous Battle of Qadesh, in which Ramses II confronted the Hittites in the fifth year of his reign **13**. As for

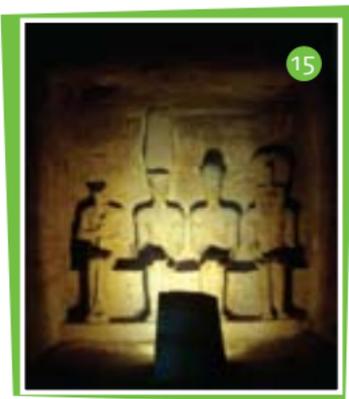




the scenes of the southern wall, they show, from left to right, the king on his chariot attacking an Asian fortress, killing a Libyan enemy, and, finally, triumphant, atop his chariot. Off of the grand hall are a series of rooms called « treasure rooms » ¹⁴ . Most likely, it was here that the most precious articles of the temple had been stored.



The back door of the hall leads to a room with four pillars. The north and south walls of this room are decorated with scenes of worship of the divine boats. It then leads to a



rectangular vestibule containing three sanctuaries. In the middle one, four statues are carved into the rock representing, from left to right, Ptah, Amon-Ra, Ramses II and Ra-Horakhty ¹⁵ . As Amelia Edwards, who visited the site in 1874, noticed for the first time, the three statues on

the right are completely illuminated by rays of the sun from the entrance of the temple on October 21 and February 21 every year (Currently on October 22 and February 22).

THE SMALL TEMPLE OF ABU SIMBEL



The small temple of Abu Simbel is located 150 m to the north of the Great Temple. Its facade, 12 meters high, is decorated with six colossi, each reaching merely 10 meters high ¹⁶: four represent Ramses II and two represent his royal wife, Nefertari, to whom the temple is dedicated ¹⁷. Statues of the royal couple's children are carved on both sides of their legs: the princes on the king's side, and the princesses on the queen's.



The entrance leads to a hall with six Hathorian pillars ¹⁸. Its walls are adorned with scenes of offerings and worship to the deities honored in the temple. To the west of the hall are three doors leading to a vestibule ¹⁹ from which the sanctuary is accessed. The latter is decorated on the back wall with a sculpture of the cow goddess Hathor protecting Ramses II.



CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION

The temples of Abu Simbel were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1979, and they enjoy special treatment in terms of conservation and preservation. You too can help us to protect these two prestigious historical monuments by respecting these guidelines :

- Please do not write on walls, nor on the signs posted throughout the site

- Please look but do not touch the reliefs and paintings because they are extremely fragile

- Please do not throw rubbish on the ground ; dispose of trash properly.

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English translation by Andrea Preisz

Photo credit : Christian Leblanc, François Gourdon, Georg Gerster, and Philippe Martinez.



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