

David O'Connor, *Abydos. Egypt's First Pharaohs and the Cult of Osiris.*

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There is no exaggeration in stating that Abydos is one of the most fascinating and enduring, yet still enigmatic, sites of Ancient Egypt. Its diverse history includes being the burial place of Egypt's first rulers, a cult centre for the god Osiris and the location of a temple of Seti I. As indicated by its longevity, Abydos was an extremely significant site for the Ancient Egyptians and at present it has been the subject of survey and excavation for over 150 years, continuing to reveal impressive discoveries. In this comprehensive volume David O'Connor provides a major overview of the site and its history, focusing in particular on the archaeological discoveries from the past 30 years and their significance.

David O'Connor is Professor of Ancient Egyptian Art in the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. In conjunction with the Pennsylvania-Yale-Institute of Fine Arts, he has been excavating at Abydos since 1967 and as such it is difficult to imagine a more suitably qualified author to present this work on Abydos.

This book is subtitled *Egypt's First Pharaohs and the Cult of Osiris* but its scope is much vaster, separated into twelve chapters and three broader parts. Part I, entitled *Abydos and Osiris*, details the early excavation of the site (Chapter 1: 'The Discovery of Abydos'), the history of the cult of Osiris at Abydos (Chapter 2: 'Eternal Lord Who Presides in Abydos') and the history of the temple built by the New Kingdom King, Seti I (Chapter 3: 'The Temple of Seti I'). Part II is entitled *Life Cycle of a Sacred Landscape*. Chapter 4, 'The Rediscovery of Abydos', details the research, excavation and survey that has been conducted since the 1960s (indirectly resulting from the combined Egyptian-UNESCO salvage of monuments at risk of being submerged by after the construction of the Aswan Dam). Chapter 5, 'The Evolution of a Sacred Landscape', details the excavations revealing evidence of activity during the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Periods, while Chapter 6 'The Expanding Landscape of the Middle Kingdom', extends this, as its title suggests, to the Middle Kingdom, including the complex of Senwosret III. Chapter 7, 'The Landscape Completed: Abydos in the New Kingdom', details the activity from this time including during the reigns of Ahmose, Thutmose III, Ramesses II and, possibly,

Akhenaten. Chapter 8, 'The Climax of the Osiris Cult', discusses this religious activity within the context of the history of Abydos during the Late Period. Part III is entitled Origins of the Abydos Landscape and includes an examination of the Dynasty 0 and Early Dynastic tombs (Chapter 9: 'The Royal Tombs of Abydos'), the massive mud brick enclosures of the 1st and 2nd Dynasties (Chapter 10: 'The Mysterious Enclosures of Abydos'), the boat graves near King Khasekhemwy's enclosure (Chapter 11: 'Boat Graves and Pyramid Origins'), and a Conclusion (Chapter 12: 'Abydos: Summing up').

It is clear that the scope of the book is wide-ranging and O'Connor makes a bold choice to convey what is known of Abydos in a topical rather than a linear, chronological or narrative fashion. This approach would, O'Connor argues, 'convey the impression that we understand more about the cultural and social dynamics shaping its history than we actually do' (p. 17). This format is initially disorienting but its provision of a 'conceptual stratigraphy' (p. 18) enables the author to convey information in a conceptual and analytical manner that is ultimately satisfying.

Some of the information presented is not new but included by necessity to provide a comprehensive analysis of the history of Abydos. The more recent discoveries are, therefore, of particular interest; prior to this book much of this information was only available from subscriptions or foreign language publications. Of note are Mary-Ann Pouls Wegner's survey of the cultic landscape, the excavations of Janet Richards at the North and Middle Cemeteries, Stephen Harvey at the Ahmose complex and Josef Wegner at the Senwosret III complex, and the Akhenaten talatat found at the Ramesses II temple. Gunter Dreyer's analysis of the early hieroglyphic signs from Tomb U-j is also fascinating. I found the chapter on the large enclosures the most exciting: these structures posed a massive undertaking to excavate and continue to contribute to the analysis of the landscape – literally and symbolically - from early Dynastic times. A bibliography for further reading is provided to enhance the readers' experience.

The format, layout and overall aesthetic of the book is without fault and complimentary to the text. The maps are particularly useful, especially in such a text which does not present the information in a conventionally chronological manner. The majority of the photographs are in black and white, with those in colour

highlighted by their contrast. It was particularly enjoyable to see the photographs of the archaeologists and workmen participating in past (sometimes long-past) excavations.

This book is an excellent source for the ancient Egyptian site of Abydos. With large and glossy photos and beautifully formatted maps and site illustrations, this book would have widespread appeal. It also contains detailed discussions about the significance of various discoveries, not only concerning Abydos and the cult of Osiris but the Egyptian landscape as a whole. As such it will be of scholarly and general interest alike. This book enables the presentation of the history of ancient Egypt through the prism of Abydos – one of the few sites able to provide the scope and analysis for such an endeavour. The book concludes with useful and current information on visiting Abydos and a full chronology, a must in all books that discuss the history of Ancient Egypt.

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