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THE *SITTS* GO TO SEA: OR, EGYPT DOESN'T END AT ASWAN

By the *Sitts*: Carlotta Maher, Crennan Ray, Susan Osgood, and Elinor Smith

In the 1960's UNESCO began a campaign to salvage the monuments of Nubia which would be submerged upon the completion of the Aswan Dam. Some temples were given to foreign countries, some were rebuilt on the shores of Lake Nasser. In 1994 the reconstructed temples became accessible with the introduction of a cruise ship between Aswan and Abu Simbel, on what is now called the "Nubian Sea." Intrigued by reports of moonlit nights and lonely temples, four *sitts* from Chicago House (*sitt* is the Arabic for "lady"), booked two berths aboard the M/S *Eugenie* for a three-day cruise early in February.

We left Luxor in the morning with a stop-over at the Aswan airport. The trip to Abu Simbel was in a small unmarked jet—rather old with tiny seats, but a mercifully short trip. Our plane circled high above the temples of Ramesses II and Nefertari and even from the height of the descending airplane they were impressive in their majesty. The size of the statues is awe-inspiring—which, of course, was their purpose.

The salvage and reconstruction of these great temples is probably one of the wonders of the modern world. They were cut into blocks (weighing as much as thirty tons apiece) and were rebuilt into artificial hills high above the rising waters of Lake Nasser. It is almost impossible to detect any of the joins—and as with all the sites that we visited, it was only the absence of crunching pot shards under foot that made us realize these buildings were reconstructed far from their original locations.

We spent the afternoon touring the temples. A new wooden floor has been installed, and the sunk reliefs are bathed in brilliant light. They are truly beautiful and depict successful scenes from Ramesses' various military exploits. One huge wall is covered with reliefs of the Battle of Kadesh, where Ramesses defeated the Hittites. It's a very free interpretation, without the strict registers you usually see in Egyptian art. Rather Amarna-esque, with scenes of the Egyptian

camp, showing the two captured spies who were really planted by the Hittites; men working, repairing chariot wheels; a surgeon tending to a man's leg; men cooking on a tripod "barbecue"; and a temple with priests praying. You can see the Orontes River surrounding Kadesh, with the fortress of the Hittites being attacked, and people falling over the walls.

On the opposite wall, the king in his chariot is shown attacking a Syrian town. A fleeing herdsman, about to be run down by the pounding feet of the horses, raises his arms and begs for mercy. Another scene shows Ramesses battling two Libyans, equal in size to the king. Ramesses' greater strength is apparent as he tramples the writhing body of one Libyan chieftain and with his lance held high above his head is ready to strike down the second.

The smaller temple, dedicated to Hathor, belongs to Nefertari. Her statues, standing between colossi of her husband, adorn the exterior of the temple. Inside, in contrast to the warlike exploits of Ramesses, she is depicted with elegance and great dignity, offering to her favorite goddesses.

The M/S *Eugenie*, a modern ship behind the facade of a paddle boat was decorated in turn-of-the-century style (more or less) and most comfortable. Our cabins were on the upper deck, each with a tiny balcony. We all preferred the port side, sunsets being more beautiful than sunrises. And the sunsets were beautiful! Gorgeous red and gold affairs that lasted forever—with the full moon simultaneously rising in the east.

The boat was about half full—mostly British groups, and four Norwegians who were filming some sort of documentary. The four *sitts* of Chicago House may yet be famous ... at least in Norway.

The first night we all went to see the temples by the light of a full moon. Everything was silver and blue, very beautiful and much enhanced by the music from the Triumphal March from *Aida*.

We got up the next morning when it was still dark AND bitter cold to watch the sun rise on the colossi. It was lovely, but more mystical by moonlight. The truly dramatic time to be there is February 22, when the rays of the sun reach to the very back of the temple and shine on the faces of Amun, Ramesses, Ptah and Ra-Harakhti (a falcon-headed god). We bade farewell to Abu Simbel (or Abu Simple as one sign called it) and sailed off to further adventures.

We cruised north in a very strange landscape—a moonscape really, with water. It was hard to remember that all of the hills we were seeing are really just the tops of mountains—the rest of them were submerged by the dammed-up Nile waters, which also displaced thousands of Nubians from their ancestral homes. The mountains recede in layer after layer, colored pale blue and gray, then deeper, until they are almost black. They resemble those tiny landscape views-through-windows in Renaissance Italian paintings. Once in a while you see huge hills of golden sand, untouched by anything but wind.

We moored briefly at Kasr Ibrim, a ruined fortress that has been there since at least 1500 B.C., used and rebuilt by just about everyone—Egyptians, Nubians, Greeks, Romans, Turks, Mamelukes, and Arabs. It was once 130 feet up on a mountain top, but because of the dam is now at eye level with the top deck of the ship. If nothing else brought home the impact of the rising water level, this ruin did. Due to the fragile nature of the site we were unable to visit, but were not upset after hearing that it was home to vipers and scorpions!

The monuments were originally situated at different spots along the Nile, but have been re-erected closer together to facilitate visiting. Our first stop was at the temples of Amada and Derr

and the tomb of Penne, a viceroy of Nubia under Ramesses VI. We went ashore in a motor launch and hiked in the soft red sand to the sites. The temples are quite surreal. There are no indications of any human habitation; only the tracks of birds, gazelles and foxes in the mud at the edge of the Lake. And it's very quiet—so quiet you can hear the silence.

Amada is a small building, undecorated on the exterior and from a distance resembling an archaeological expedition's storage magazine. The rear sanctuaries, from the time of Thutmosis III and Amenhotep II, contain painted reliefs which are quite famous, but extremely difficult to see in the dim light. One of the more engaging decorations was in the small columned hall of Thutmosis IV—graffiti of camels and donkeys done by ancient Romans as they passed through on the Nubian trade routes.

We tramped across the desert (about 1/4 of a mile) to the temple of Derr dedicated to Amen-Ra and Ra-Harakhti. The temple consists of two pillared halls, hollowed out from the cliff. The reliefs depicted are the omnipresent themes of Ramesses' battles and triumphs and although rather naive and damaged, there were some extremely nice details—the king offering to an especially endearing Seshat with her star headdress and panther skin garment and a procession of the king's children (girls on one side of the temple, boys on the other).

Our guide was extremely well informed and as we were listening to his commentary one of the Englishmen collapsed with a thud. Luckily he fell on his backpack and didn't hit his head. At dinner that night, his wife confided that he "had a bit of tummy coming on!"; this became our favorite expression.

Coming soon: *Reliefs and Inscriptions at Luxor Temple II: The Façade, Portals, Upper Registers, Columns and Marginalia of the Colonnade Hall*

This volume will complete the documentation of the Colonnade Hall, and will include: 1) the scenes and texts on the walls of the north façade; 2) the scenes and inscriptions on the columns and architraves of the Colonnade Hall; 3) the *in situ* upper register scenes.; 4) the reliefs of the south interior wall of the Colonnade; 5) the publication of the ancient graffiti from the Colonnade Hall. The volume will conclude with documentation of the three statue groups now in the northern end of the Colonnade Hall. As with the first volume in this series, a booklet containing translations, commentary, and a glossary of the texts will accompany the approximately 93 plates.

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The next morning, we had our first glimpse of Wadi es-Sebua and Dakka bathed in the pink glow of dawn. Dakka has been rebuilt dramatically on a small bluff, and the pylon and temple were silhouetted against the sky in crisp geometric shapes. Dakka was begun by the Meroitic/Nubian King Arkamani (c. 220 B.C.) and later adapted by the Ptolemies and Emperor Augustus. The Nubian reliefs are by far the most interesting—small and precise in detail, they were scenes of the king offering to local gods of Aswan. Among our favorites were Anukis, the goddess of Aswan with her elaborate feathered headdress and the lion-headed goddess Sekhmet.

We trekked across the desert, passing half-buried statues and block fragments to the most impressively situated Wadi es-Sebua Temple, with its avenue of sphinxes (hence its name, Valley of the Lions). There is a colossus of Ramesses II (who else?) in front of the pylon, and engaged standing statues against the pillars in the inner court. It is similar to the layout of Medinet Habu, and we all felt quite at home. The interior of the temple is carved directly into the rock, and at some point in its long history the sanctuary was used as a Christian church. The Christians destroyed the statues of the gods Amen-Ra and Ra-Harakhti and replaced them with a painting of St. Peter. However, they left the paintings of the pharaoh making his offerings, so now it appears that the Egyptian king is presenting flowers to the Christian saint!

Back on the boat, we had a longish cruise to Aswan and employed our time usefully in the ship's small Turkish bath. The other members of our cruise were really treating it as a southern holiday, especially the Brits who were in shorts, bathing suits and halter tops. It was about 70 degrees or so, but with a very strong cold wind! Meanwhile the four of us were all wrapped up in our usual go-to-the-desert clothing: long-sleeved shirts, pants, scarves (and then there was always Carlotta in her down coat!). They must have

thought we were very peculiar. At 5:00 PM every day a bell rang, signaling tea and cake in the lounge.

The temples of Kalabsha, Qertassi and Beit el-Wali have been relocated on an island a few kilometers southwest of the Aswan High Dam. Our last evening we arrived at the Temples after dark and were entertained by a Sound and Light Show. The "sound" was a seemingly inappropriate Gregorian Chant followed by a Broadway musical number and the "lights" only worked on one side of the temple, but it didn't matter—the magic was there. The next morning, we visited the site, landing at the ancient quay and climbing the modern steps to the undecorated pylon.

Kalabsha's resident god is Mandulis, a Nubian solar deity, and the temple was built by Caesar Augustus. It's deliciously late and decadent and has wonderfully fanciful carvings. Parts of it are unfinished so the fussiness of the reliefs is in dramatic contrast to the rough-hewn and incomplete walls of the rest of the temple. The columns are topped with grapes and papyrus, dates and palms, and open lotuses, and there's lots of graffiti from all countries, dating back to the first century. On the roof we saw a square opening that tunneled down into the crypt. Below is a chamber where the high priest would hide and when the pharaoh asked questions of the god in an adjoining shrine; the priest would be the oracle. One wonders why no one ever figured this out, as it probably went on everywhere! Undoubtedly, the urge to believe. Outside the temple, the yard is filled with blocks with prehistoric graffiti—a wonderful huge spotted elephant, giraffes, oryxes, gazelles, and boats. The great stone blocks making up the outer wall are in three stages of completion, so you really see the building process. The very rough stones have the stonecutters' marks on them that were used to tally up how much work each man did.

Qertassi is a treasure—a tiny Roman kiosk with four slender papyrus columns inside, two

Hathor columns at the entrance. It is a charming and graceful structure and the perfect photo opportunity.

Beit el-Wali is another treasure. Built early in the reign of Ramesses II, its small chapel is entirely carved out of the mountainside. The outer courtyard has wonderful free reliefs of fighting, offering processions showing all the produce of Nubia (gold, ivory, frankincense, leopard skins, ostrich feathers, eggs and ebony). The cattle have wonderful widespread curving horns—the artist has carved the ends of the horns to look like outstretched hands, and in the center where the horns meet the cow's head, a little Nubian man's head arises. The interior painted reliefs are in an excellent state of preservation, retaining most of the original colors and reminiscent of the perfection of Abydos art. We were able to relive our en-

joyment of Beit el-Wali when we returned to Chicago House, as the temple reliefs were published by The Epigraphic Survey.

Our journey on the Nubian Sea transported us into another world. It was a pleasure to leave Luxor where the monuments, crowded with sightseers, are surrounded by traffic lights and tourist hotels. In Nubia, the monuments exist in the quiet purity of the desert. The only footprints we saw were those of fellow tourists, but more often it was the tracks of insects and animals that marked the sand. Except for the sound of the wind and the creaking of the ship, it was completely still on the water. With conservation and care this area can remain unchanged. The ancient monuments of Nubia were saved from the rising waters of Lake Nasser. Hopefully, the shores of the lake will survive as a wilderness.

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