

The Meaning of the Reliefs at the Temple of Abu Simbel

by
Mary Katrina Shank

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Prof. Benedict Lowe
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The way the Egyptians perceived the world was greatly influenced by their geographical environment. In Egypt the Nile forms a thin thread of life-giving water in an otherwise waterless region that has far too little rainfall in the area to support life¹. The miracle of the river was its annual inundation that flooded the land to either side of the river channel, watering the soil and spreading fertile black silt in which farmers could plant their crops. Beyond that was desert, together the pair formed a contrasting duality that represented more than just the opposition of fertile and sterile soil, but also a cosmic struggle between the forces of order and the forces of chaos². This worldview was not limited to just their immediate physical situation either.

Since time immemorial, the ancient Egyptians had a strong conviction that the kingship was a sacred trust passed down to men from the gods who ruled before them³. And that at the time of creation the ordered world was brought into being through the creator god⁴. According to myth, the first to rule over humankind was the god Re. When Re became old, there were some who made fun of him, so he rose to the sky and sent his daughter Hathor to avenge him. He left the god Osiris on earth as his heir to the throne⁵. In many ways Osiris represented the ordered world. He came to be regarded as having ruled Egypt as a beneficent king who brought the benefits of civilization to his country⁶. Osiris was killed by his brother Seth, but left behind a posthumous son, Horus, who challenged his uncle's right to the throne. Horus and Seth fought over the kingship for many years, and eventually Horus won and gained his birthright⁷, while the resurrected Osiris became ruler of the underworld. Thus order was re-established in the universe and chaos brought under control⁸.

The Egyptian pharaoh was considered the embodiment of Horus on earth and son of the sun god Re⁹, during his lifetime and was then associated with Osiris after his death¹⁰. The pharaoh had a double nature: he is human while on earth, but after death becomes united with the gods and is worshipped as a god in his mortuary temple¹¹.

Nowhere in the ancient world was the ideology of kingship more highly developed than in Egypt; and perhaps nowhere in human history was it more deeply intertwined with religious beliefs. As a veritable son of god the Egyptian pharaoh functioned as a bridge between perceived and believed

¹ Gay Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt* (British Museum Press, 1997), 14.

² *Ibid.*

³ Zahi Hawass, *The Mysteries of Abu Simbel: Ramesses II and the Temples of the Rising Sun* (American University in Cairo Press, 2001), 62.

⁴ Robins, 14.

⁵ Hawass, 62.

⁶ Robins, 17.

⁷ Hawass, 62.

⁸ Robins, 17.

⁹ Hawass, 62.

¹⁰ Robins, 17.

¹¹ Hawass, 62.

reality – positioned between gods and mortals, he acted on behalf of the gods to his people and on behalf of the people to the gods themselves¹². Serving in this sacred role, the king provides a bridge between the earthly sphere and the world of the gods¹³. That is, the mediator, and was responsible for maintaining the order of the world to prevent it from slipping back into chaos¹⁴. This maintenance of order includes the ritual presentation of offering to the gods by the king or the high priest appointed to act in his stead.

Of the many offerings which the king is shown presenting to the gods, the most abstract yet important was the ‘presentation of Ma’at’ in which the king offered a small figure of that goddess as a symbol of his maintenance of the order established by the gods. As a deity, Ma’at represented truth, order, balance, correctness, justice, cosmic harmony and other qualities which precisely embodied the responsibility of the king’s role¹⁵.

The maintenance of order symbolized by the ritual presentation of Ma’at was also expressed in many aspects of temple iconography. As such scenes of the king smiting enemies, hunting hippopotamus or netting birds in the marshes are not so much records of isolated activities of the king as they are virtual models of the suppression of elements symbolizing the forces of disharmony and disorder within the land of Egypt and in the cosmos at large¹⁶.

This fundamental pairing of order and chaos illustrates the Egyptians tendency to see their world in term of dualities. Another name for Egypt was the Two Lands, referring to the Valley (Upper Egypt) and the Delta (Lower Egypt)¹⁷. The king not only united Upper and Lower Egypt but as discussed earlier he was also the link between the human and the divine worlds; thus it was in the single person of the king that the duality of Egypt was bound into one¹⁸. Although the king was himself a human being, the office of kingship was divine; the human body of the king was the vessel in which divine kingship manifested itself in the form of the royal *ka* or life force that was passed on from one king to the next¹⁹. The king was thus in some ways similar to, though not identical with, the gods, and one of his titles, *netjer nefer*, meant ‘Perfect God’. Indeed the king could be deified after his death or even during his lifetime when the living king could be depicted performing ritual actions before his own deified form²⁰.

¹² Richard B. Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt* (Thames & Hudson, 2000), 86.

¹³ Hawass, 62.

¹⁴ Robins, 17.

¹⁵ Wilkinson, 88.

¹⁶ Wilkinson, 89.

¹⁷ Robins, 17.

¹⁸ Robins, 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

In order to become a god, the king had certain duties, given to him at his coronation by the gods that he was obliged to carry out. These duties were: to build a tomb for him-self; build temples for the gods; defeat Egypt's enemies; present offerings to the gods; and guarantee the unity of the two regions of Egypt. Achieving all these goals raised the pharaoh to the stature of a god²¹. In building and decorating temples, or in commissioning furnishings and items to be used in cult, the king engaged in acts of creation that strengthened order and banished chaos²². A major icon of kingship showed the victorious king about to smite cowering enemy captives, in an image that symbolized the triumph of order over chaos²³.

During the 18th Dynasty, the priests of the god Amun became the most powerful and that is why, Amenhotep III prepared for religious reform. After the return to the religion of Amun, his priests became even more powerful. Eager to take on the administration, power, and probably the throne of Egypt, but the kings of the 19th Dynasty dealt with this problem in a different way from that of Amenhotep III and his son Akhenaten²⁴. They wanted to affirm their divine aspect and nature and to show it, especially before the people so that they would never think of revolting against the god king, the representative and heir of the god on earth. They even went so far as thinking that in the case that the priests of Amun thought about supplanting the king at any time, that they would be faced with resistance from the people, who would not let the god be usurped by ordinary individuals²⁵. To instill widespread belief in the divine nature of the pharaoh, these rulers took the following steps:

- They built large temples in Nubia and Egypt dedicated to the worship of the living king.
- They linked the pharaoh with the other gods in their temples.
- They placed enormous statues of the pharaoh (Colossi) in front of and inside the temples of the gods, inscribing on them names that expressed their divinity²⁶.

The Great Temple:

The Great Temple at Abu Simbel was built in Year 34 of Ramesses II's reign and dedicated to Re-Horakhti, Amun-Re, Ptah, and Ramesses II himself as god-king²⁷. The enormous pylon-shaped façade of the temple is cut back into the pinkish stone of the cliff. Next there are steps leading up to a ledge decorated with sculptures of falcons, as symbols of the sun god, and mummiform statues of

²¹ Hawass, 64.

²² Robins, 17.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Nermine Choukry, *Abu Simbel* (American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Hawass, 62.

²⁷ Hawass, 69.

Ramesses II as Osiris²⁸. So before we ever even enter the temple proper itself we see first-hand the efforts of Ramesses II to firmly make clear his divine source of authority both in matters of this life and the next. Just like his predecessors Ramesses II linked him-self directly with other gods in his temple.



Ledge - Abu Simbel

This ledge extends across the façade of the temple, in front of four colossal seated figures of Ramesses II, called also Ramesses the Great²⁹.



Great Temple Facade - Abu Simbel

From as early as Old Kingdom times and even before, great stone images of kings were carved from monolithic blocks of stone for erection in temples and shrines. These colossi functioned on several levels³⁰. Stationed along the temple approaches and in major processional areas they did act in a protective fashion, but they also showed the inseparable relationship of the king with the gods

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Wilkinson, 59.

at a level directly connected to that of the divine³¹. As manifestations of the spirits of the pharaohs they represented, they were usually accessible to the people or in areas which were at least open on special occasions. Colossi could be worshipped directly by the people, acting as intercessors with the gods or as gods in their own right³². Again Ramesses II is appealing directly to his people across all of Egypt to recognize his divine authority and standing.

The sides of the two thrones on which the colossi sit are decorated with images of the god Hapi, god of the Nile, who performs the *sema-tawy*, the symbolic uniting of the two lands, tying the lotus of Upper Egypt and the papyrus of Lower Egypt around the hieroglyph for *unite*³³. Placing this representation here gives two obvious meanings: first Ramesses II is proving to the gods and the people that he is fulfilling his divine mandate of kingship by uniting Upper and Lower Egypt; second by having the god Hapi perform the symbolism of the *sema-tawy* Ramesses II directly reinforces his existence as the link connecting the divine with the worldly, the second form of Egyptian unification for as always Egypt has duality. In many ways this is a clear presentation of the Egyptian belief of sympathetic magic. By placing this representation here Ramesses II says to all that this is what is.

Below the thrones of the colossi are engraved the nine bows, symbols of the traditional enemies of Egypt³⁴. By being placed under the feet of Ramesses II, the nine bows provide an abstract of the major icon of kingship; that of the triumphant pharaoh smiting enemies. After all, how better to really destroy your enemy than to trample them to death. Thus by his might Ramesses II brings the forces of chaos (Egypt's enemies) under control and maintains order.

Surmounting the Great Temple façade is a frieze of twenty-two baboons (symbolic greeters of the sun god³⁵) with their paws raised³⁶. By being placed above the colossi the baboons are first to be illuminated by the sun's light each morning³⁷.

Above the entrance to the Great Temple is a niche containing a statue of the god Re-Horakhti, who carries a *user* staff in one hand and the feather of Ma'at, goddess of truth in the other. On his head is the sun disk of Re. This statue is thus an elaborate form of Ramesses II's name: User-Ma'at-Re³⁸. Although the image of Re-Horakhti emphasizes the solar aspect of the Great Temple, the display of Ramesses II's name over the entrance makes clear that the Great Temple is in fact

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Hawass, 69.

³⁴ Hawass, 70.

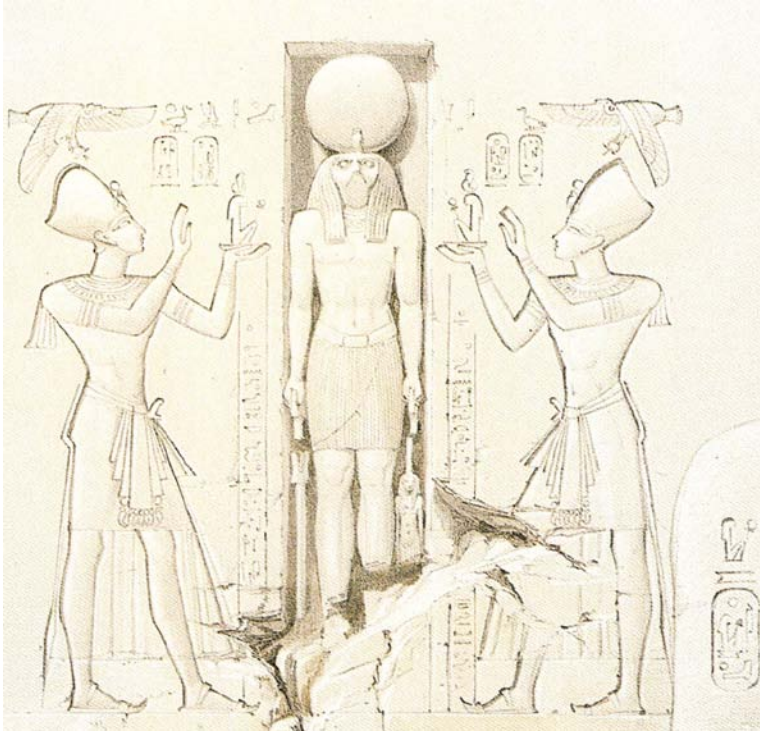
³⁵ Wilkinson, 226.

³⁶ Choukry, 23.

³⁷ Wilkinson, 226.

³⁸ Hawass, 70.

dedicated to a divine form of the king³⁹. In this is shown, the efforts of the pharaoh's to emphasize worship of the living king, as established earlier.



Statue of god Re-Horakhti in niche – Abu Simbel

The entrance to the temple leads to a corridor whose walls are engraved with images of Ramesses II presenting sacrificial plates to the god Re-Horakhti and the goddess Weret-Hekau⁴⁰. The importance of the pharaoh's presentation of offerings to various gods cannot be overstated with regard to his divine mandate to maintain order. This again displays elements of Egyptian belief in sympathetic magic, by placing it here it will be. And it also shows to both gods and people that Ramesses II knows his duty and fulfills it scrupulously.

At the end of this corridor is a door with cartouches of Ramesses II and a depiction of the king before Re-Horakhti and the gods Sekhmet, Amun-Re, and Nut. Ramesses II presents a piece of cloth to Amun and flowers to Re-Horakhti⁴¹. The continual repetition that offerings to the gods by the pharaoh are an absolute must to maintain order in the world and cosmos, as well as displaying aspects of sympathetic magic would be pointless in the fact of this fact. As such I make clear my interpretation for all future occasions discussed hereafter of offerings by Ramesses II to various gods (including his own deified self). These representations are the evidence to both god and man that Ramesses fulfills his divine mandate of kingship in maintaining order against chaos. They show the

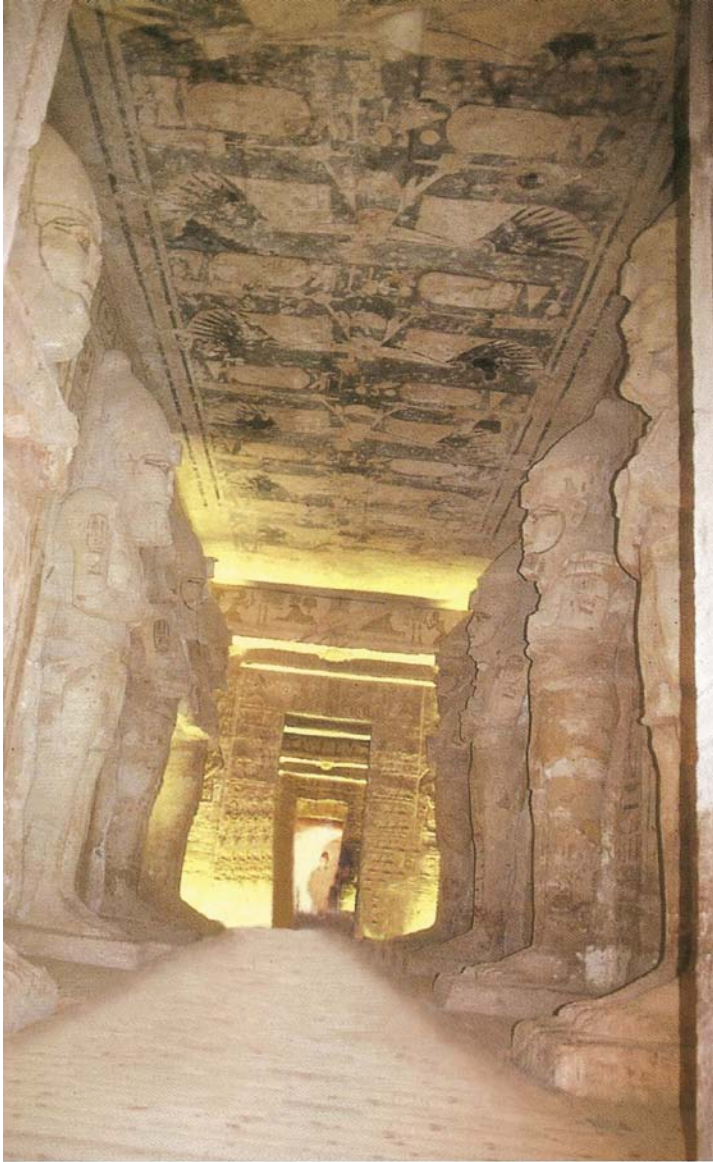
³⁹ Robins, 181.

⁴⁰ Hawass, 72.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Egyptian belief in sympathetic magic that by placing it here it will be so. And it also depicts the fact that Ramesses II did in fact make offerings to the various gods of Egypt himself.

The door leads to a hall overlooking the central walkway on the sides of which are carved statues of Ramesses II. Those on the south side wear the white crown of Upper Egypt, those on the north the red crown of Lower Egypt⁴².



the Pillared Hall of the Great Temple of Abu Simbel.

On the columns to the left Ramesses II carved a description of the building of the temple of Ptah in Memphis in Year 34 of his reign⁴³. On these columns are also the following figures: On the first, Ramesses II burns incense before an image of himself as a god; on the second, Queen Nefertari burns incense before Hathor; on the third, Ramesses II presents flowers to the god Min and incense

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

to Isis⁴⁴. On the second column, Ramesses II presents the Ma'at feather (symbol of truth and justice) to the god Amun-Re and presents incense and sacrifices to the god Ptah, bread to the god Sobek-Re, and flowers to Amun-Re. The reliefs on the third column portray the king presenting a plate of offerings to Re-Horakhti, sacrifices to Amun-Re, and incense to Osiris⁴⁵.

The columns on the right have the following decoration: on the first column, Ramesses II presents the Ma'at feather to the god Shu; on the second, he presents offerings to Horus, and flowers to the god Mut; on the third, he presents flowers to the god Djehuty, bread to Amun-Re, flowers to Horus of the city of Ha, bread to Anubis, offerings to the god Khnum, the Ma'at feather to Amun-Re and flowers to Re-Horakhti⁴⁶.

On both sides of the hall the fourth column is in poor condition now but had similar scenes⁴⁷. The ceiling between the two lines of columns is decorated with an image of the vulture goddess Nekhbet spreading her wings; the two sides of the ceiling are decorated with stars⁴⁸.



Ceiling Pillared Hall Great Temple Abu Simbel

The eastern wall of the pillared hall is dominated by a drawing of Ramesses II smiting Nubian and Hittite prisoners in the presence of the god Amun and a second image of Ramesses II smiting prisoners before the god Re-Horakhti⁴⁹.

⁴⁴ Hawass, 74.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Hawass, 74.



Ramesses II smites enemies with a mace in front of the god Amun-Re - Abu Simbel.



Ramesses II smites enemies with a mace in front of the god Re-Horakhti - Abu Simbel.

The southern wall of the hall shows Ramesses II burning incense on the top half and scenes of his wars in Nubia, Libya, and Syria, including one depicting Ramesses II attacking a Syrian fortress, on the lower half⁵⁰.

⁵⁰ Hawass, 74.

On the western wall, Ramesses II drives two columns of Nubian prisoners into the presence of Amun-Re and two columns of Syrian prisoners before Re-Horakhti⁵¹.

The northern wall portrays events from the battle of Qadesh in the following order: the advance of the Ptah regiment and Ramesses II in his chariot; the city of Qadesh; Ramesses II again in his chariot; the battle of the military chariots; the two spies being captured and questioned; the camp and military chariots and assistance arriving to support the Egyptian army⁵².

Doors in the northern wall of the pillared hall open into two rooms that appear to have been used as storerooms for the temple. Their walls are decorated with images of the king in the presence of Hathor, Isis, Re-Horakhti, Amun-Re, Ptah, Khonsu, and Ma'at⁵³.

Doors in the north and south ends of the western wall lead to two foyers, each of which leads into two additional rooms. The walls of the north-western foyer are decorated with drawings of Ramesses II presenting offerings to Djehuti and Amun-Re, the triumvirate of Thebes (Amun, Mut, and Khonsu), and Montu, Isis, and Re⁵⁴.

The walls of the two northwestern rooms are decorated with images of Ramesses II before the gods Ma'at, Webwawat, Amun-Re, Khnum, Ptah, Djehuti and Montu. Four small cows are led before Khnum, and cloth, plates, sacrifices and paint are presented to the gods⁵⁵.

The walls of the southwestern rooms are decorated with scenes of a religious nature. On the walls of the northern room, Ramesses II bows before Amun-Re and the goddess Mut; on the northern side, Ramesses II presents offerings to the god Min, while on the southern side, he presents wine to the god Ptah⁵⁶.

After the great pillared hall there is a second smaller pillared hall. Originally at its entrance were carved two sphinxes and a headless sandstone statue of Bissor II, ruler of Kush; all of these statues are now in the British Museum. This room is almost a perfect square, its ceiling resting on four square-cut columns. The walls and columns are decorated with religious scenes; Ramesses II presenting flowers to Amun-Re and Mut; Ramesses II and Queen Nefertari advancing towards the god Amun-Re; Ramesses II before Amun-Re and Re-Horakhti; Ramesses II and Nefertari before the bark of the divine Ramesses II; and Ramesses II presenting lettuce to Amun-Re and Isis.⁵⁷

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Hawass, 76.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

From an opening in the center of the western wall of the second pillared hall we enter the vestibule, a broad hall, longer from north to south, perhaps used to present offerings, such as wine, fruit, and flowers depicted on the walls. There are also scenes showing Ramesses II before himself as a god; Ramesses II presenting wine to Horus, incense to Amun-Re, and flowers to Ptah. The western wall of this room has three doors. The doors at the two sides each lead to a small undecorated storage chamber; the center door leads to the inner sanctuary⁵⁸.

Dominating the *sanctum sanctorum* is a niche in the western wall containing four rock cut statues, from left to right, of Ptah, Amun-Re, Ramesses II as a god, and Re-Horakhti. A broken base in the center of the room would have held the sacred bark⁵⁹.

The most important scene in the sanctuary shows Ramesses II before the god Min asking for the provision of many soldiers. Other scenes show Ramesses II before the bark of Amun-Re, offering perfume to the god Amun-Min, and Ramesses II before his own divine bark⁶⁰.

To the northwest of this temple is a chapel to the sun god and to the south of this chapel is another smaller one dedicated to Thoth. Both are decorated with religious scenes. Clearly, Ramesses II has represented himself among these gods to show his divinity. It would seem that the orientation of these chapels with the sun was designed to associate him with the sun god Re, so as a sequence in this association, Ramesses II depicted himself as Re on the temple façade, as shown by the baboons rising to hail the sunrise⁶¹.

The Temple of Queen Nefertari:

Located to the north of the Great Temple, at Abu Simbel, lies the temple of Queen Nefertari, which is also dedicated to the mother goddess Hathor⁶². Usually seen in the form of a cow or a sistrum (the principle attribute of the goddess); however, when depicted with a human face Hathor is still shown with the cow ears⁶³.

⁵⁸ Hawass, 77.

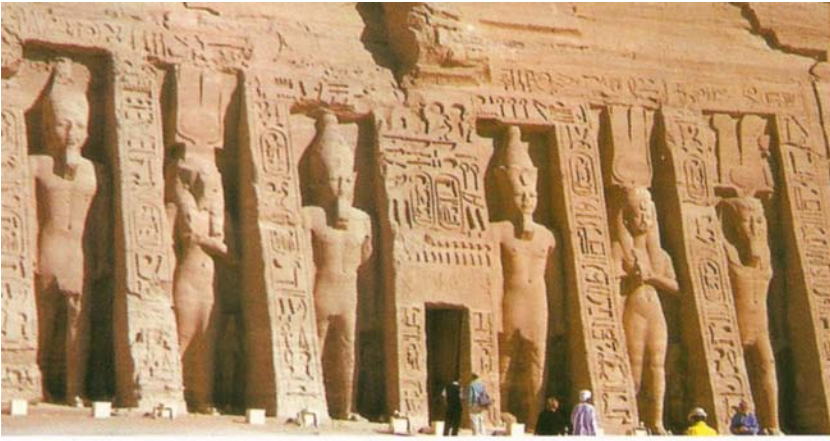
⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

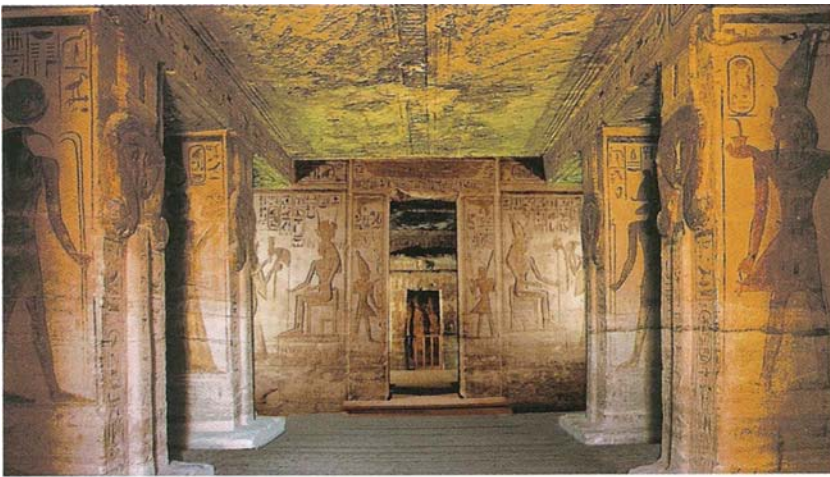
⁶¹ Hawass, 78.

⁶² Hawass, 79; Wilkinson, 83.

⁶³ Wilkinson, 83, 67.



The façade of the Temple of Nefertari - Abu Simbel.



The Square Hall of the Temple of Nefertari - Abu Simbel.

The two sides of the entrance are carved with scenes of Ramesses II presenting wine to Re-Horakhti; the arches above the entrance are decorated with cartouches and texts about Ramesses II and Nefertari⁶⁴. From the entrance, a passage leads to the square hall, the ceiling of which rests on six square columns, each surmounted by a head of the goddess Hathor. The images on the columns show Ramesses II and Nefertari presenting offerings to different gods and goddesses⁶⁵.

The ceiling of this hall is carved with a text in which Ramesses II dedicates the temple to Queen Nefertari. In Ancient Egypt, the Queen, was the embodiment of the goddess Hathor, who was the eye of the god Re, wife of the living king and mother of the future king⁶⁶.

Among the several scenes in this hall we see Ramesses II, accompanied by Nefertari, as he is about to kill a Nubian prisoner before Amun-Re; Ramesses II before the goddess Hathor, and

⁶⁴ Hawass, 80.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Ramesses II advancing towards the god Ptah in his palace. We also see Queen Nefertari before the goddess Hathor and King Ramesses II offering wine to Re-Horakhti⁶⁷.

The pillared hall has three doors at the back all leading to a broad vestibule. The middle door is decorated with titles of Ramesses II. The vestibule itself is decorated with scenes of Ramesses II presenting wine to Re-Horakhti while Nefertari offers flowers to Khnum, Satet, and Anhket. In another scene Ramesses II presents flowers to Horus-Min, Horus-Baki, and Horus-Bohan, and wine to Amun-Re⁶⁸.

In the center of the west wall of this hall is a door leading to the inner sanctuary. This door is decorated with cartouches of Nefertari protected by the wings of the vulture goddess, Nekhbet⁶⁹.

In the western wall of the sanctuary is a niche containing a rock-cut statue of the goddess Hathor in the shape of a cow protecting Ramesses II⁷⁰.

Ramesses II consolidated his godly state by building numerous temples in which he was worshipped in the image of the different gods⁷¹.

Thus the beautiful temples at Abu Simbel represent a magnificent paean to Ramesses the Great and his beautiful Queen Nefertari as gods. He was worshipped there, by Nubians and Egyptians, during his lifetime and after his death. After lying hidden beneath the sands for centuries, the temples are once again serving their original purpose, bringing eternal life to their builder and his consort⁷².

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⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Hawass, 65.

⁷² Hawass, 65.