

Mysterious Abu Simbel Temples & Egyptian Sculpturing Art

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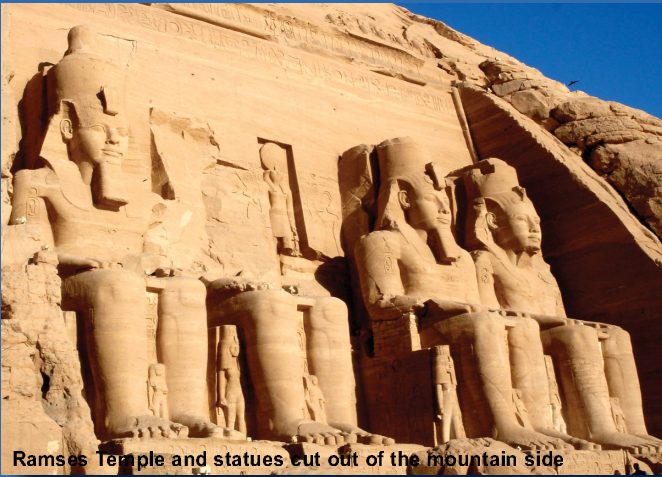


This article focuses on the mysterious temples of Abu Simbel in southern Egypt and their associated sculptured art and provides us with a fascinating insight, not only into the temple structures, but also on aspects of daily life of Egyptians, their pharaonic rulers and the gods they worshipped.

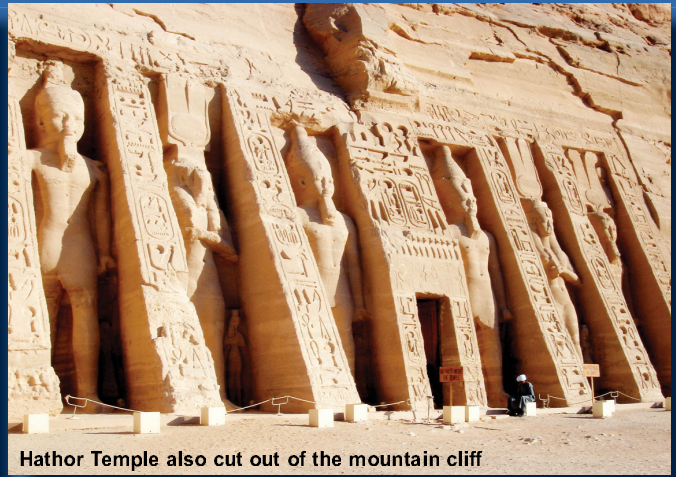
These unique temples carved out of the river bank rock face were a very important manifestation of power of the “pharaoh” Ramses II. They were inaugurated in year 24 of his very long rule of 66 years.

Just consider where he had these temples positioned, at the most southern border of his empire. The most frequent military activity was focused on holding the rebellious Nubian kings and tribes under strict control. So these temples far away from the capital were a demonstration of immense power and extension of the Egyptian empire.

They were built to show that the pharaoh was god send and any aggressive intruder would challenge not only the pharaoh, but also the powerful gods and their multiple forms of punishments.



Ramses Temple and statues cut out of the mountain side



Hathor Temple also cut out of the mountain cliff

The Discovery

The two Abu Simbel temples dedicated to Ramses and his favorite wife queen Nefertari represent in Egypt the second most impressive monuments standing today after the Giza pyramids. This unique temple site is situated some 40km north of Egypt's current border with Sudan.

When discovered on 22 March 1813 by Swiss archaeologist Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, the Abu Simbel temples were over two thirds covered by sand and only the heads of the four colossal Ramses statues were visible.

Therefore these monuments were not immediately recognized as a temple, and it was only after tons of sand were removed 4 years later by Italian adventurer Belzoni that the entrances to the inner rock chambers and sanctuaries were found. The same Burckhardt also re-discovered a year earlier the forgotten Nabataean capital of Petra in Jordan.

In ancient times there were no land routes running parallel to the Nile, so the only means of travel was by boat on the river itself. When Nubian traders navigated downstream with their wares and entered Egyptian territory, it must have been an impressive sight to see these monumental 20m high seated statues of Ramses.

This demonstration of supremacy must have certainly reduced the Nubian

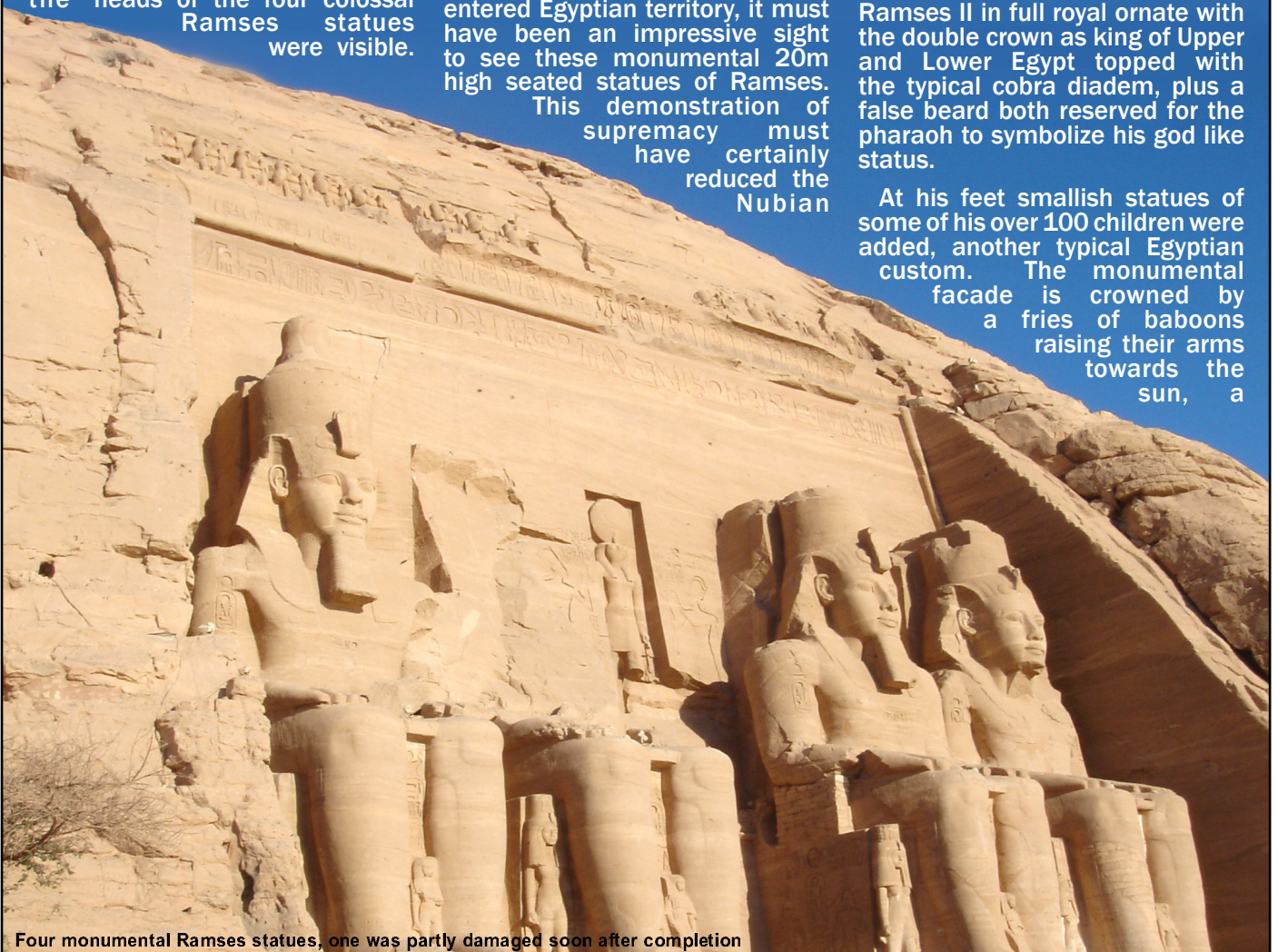
appetite for rebellion against the powerful Egyptian empire.

Take a Closer Look

The left of the 4 Ramses statues is the best preserved of all and features some Greek and Phoenician graffiti from early mercenaries. Unfortunately the second statue was damaged shortly after it was finished with the upper half broken off for unknown reasons and still lying at its feet today.

50 years later the third statue was even restored by pharaoh Sethos II. The 4 statues show Ramses II in full royal ornate with the double crown as king of Upper and Lower Egypt topped with the typical cobra diadem, plus a false beard both reserved for the pharaoh to symbolize his god like status.

At his feet smallish statues of some of his over 100 children were added, another typical Egyptian custom. The monumental facade is crowned by a frieze of baboons raising their arms towards the sun, a



Four monumental Ramses statues, one was partly damaged soon after completion

symbol of praising the sun god.

Over the central entrance the falcon headed sun god Re-Harachte is shown, plus Ramses offering a miniature depiction of goddess Ma'at on his palm to demonstrate the so important overall cosmic balance in Egyptian belief.

Another interesting bit of historic information is found on the left side, where a marriage stele was found and re-erected as reference to an important political motivated marriage to a Hittite princess. At the time the Hittite Empire was another super power ruling in Anatolia and source of previous battles until the first recorded peace treaty in history was signed and honored with the mentioned royal marriage.

Entering the Ramses Temple you will discover 2 halls cut 63m deep into the rock. The first hall is nearly square measuring 16x18m and is flanked by 8 Osiris type columns with 10m high Ramses statues and a total of 8 partly painted side chambers.

The second hall has 4 columns and a sanctuary chamber at the end. This holy chamber houses 4 seated statues at the back wall, including those of god Ptah representing the royal capital Memphis, god Amun-Re representing the city of Thebes,

god Re-Harachte representing the city of Heliopolis and finally Ramses depicted as god himself with the so-called blue helmet like war crown.

In addition the sanctuary has a podium in it's center to place the holy barge. This temple and it's sanctuary chamber was constructed in such a way, that each year on 20 February and 20 October the sun rays of the rising morning sun would touch and lighten up Ramses and the 3 god statues. This effect was regarded as an important holy symbol and event in the ancient Egyptian calendar and was celebrated accordingly.

Interesting Relief Scenes

The inner temple walls offer an interesting array of relief scenes giving us a good insight into Egyptian history. Ramses II is shown in many different poses and situations and is always depicted with the main deities to demonstrate his god send status and heavenly power base.

In one scene Ramses is putting the cosmic order back into balance, which was an annual ritual the pharaoh had to perform to renew his power. This was done with a typical scene of clubbing Egypt's enemies in front of sun gods Re-Harachte and Amun-Re.

Closely related to this power

demonstration are the many war scenes. Some show Ramses in his golden battle chariot galloping towards the fortress of Kadesh situated in today's Syria and killing with his bow and arrows many Hitite enemies, even those high on top of the fort walls.

Other scenes show Ramses again killing enemies with a spear and finally in a huge triumphal procession with all the captured prisoners. It was custom to record the number of enemies killed by counting their chopped off hands and penises.

The Abu Simbel Temple also has one of the few relief scenes depicting a procession of holy barges giving us a better insight today into ancient ceremonies and rituals.

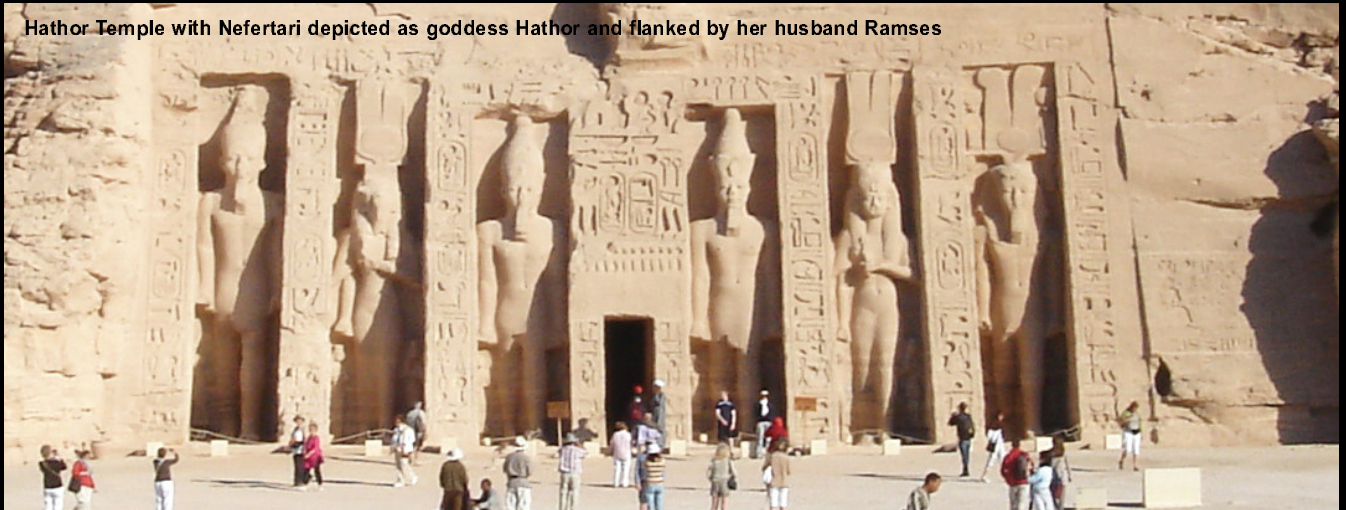
The Harthor Temple

The Harthor Temple was built at same time by Ramses II for his favorite wife Nefertari, who worshipped the important goddess of love Hathor. This smaller temple was carved out of a slightly inclined mountain side to the right of the Ramses temple and is 28m wide and up to 12m high.

The facade consists of 6 monolith statues recessed in niches and a small central entrance. Two 12m high statues of Nefertari left and right of the entrance show her



Hathor Temple with Nefertari depicted as goddess Hathor and flanked by her husband Ramses



as goddess Harthor each flanked on both sides by her husband Ramses with smaller statues of their children at their feet. The rock face left as space between the statue niches doubles as natural columns and is covered with many hieroglyphs and royal cartouches.

Again the temple has 2 halls, the first hall measuring 12m square with 6 Harthor columns showing the cow eared goddess Harthor with a holy cult instrument the *sistrum*.

On the back wall statues of the royal couple are situated. The temple sanctuary walls show various relief scenes with goddess Harthor protecting Ramses and Nefertari praying to gods and offering food plates in sacrifice.

Ramses married Nefertari before he was crowned king and it is interesting to note that she did not carry the title of king's

daughter after his ascension and therefore we have to assume that she was not of royal blood. She was his favorite wife and bore him 9 children including his first born son Amunherkhepeshef plus 4 more sons and 4 daughters.

Goddess Hathor

In ancient Egypt main deities had multiple roles and Hathor was no different being the responsible goddess of love, fertility and motherhood, protecting mothers at birth, as well as the mother and wife of the ruling king.

Other roles involved being the solar sky goddess, goddess of foreign regions and trading, goddess of life after death and regeneration, goddess of happiness, music and finally luck - quite a long list demonstrating her importance.

Hathor was mainly shown wearing cow horns and a sun disc

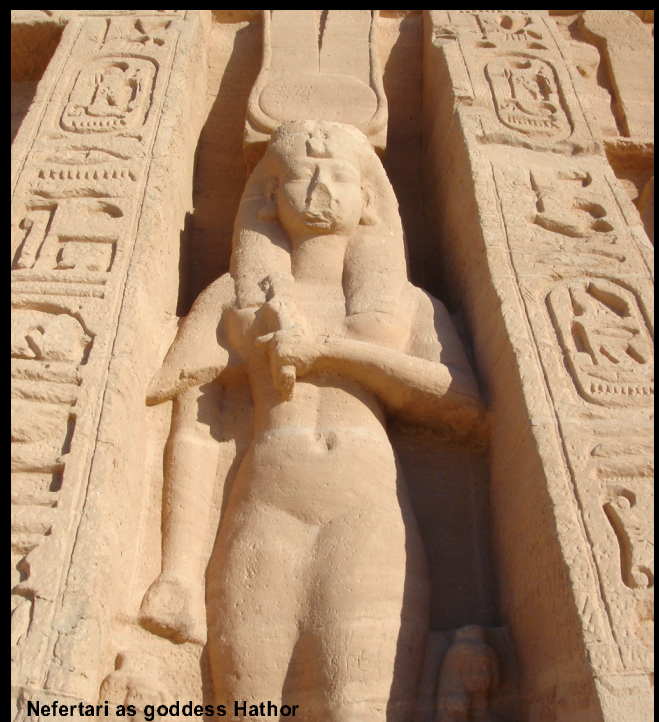
on her head with a turquoise or red colored dress. Some times she was depicted also with a falcon seated on a stick on her head in her role as mother of falcon headed god Horus.

The 42 Egyptian provinces all nominated one of the over 500 gods as their main provincial deity. Hathor was the main protecting goddess of the 3 Upper Egypt provinces of *Iqer*, *Nedjifit Pentit* and *Medenit*, as well as of the Lower Egypt province of *Imentet*. In the Egyptian pantheon sun god Re was her father and therefore Hathor was seen as the "eye of Re" on earth. Hathor also played the mother role to falcon headed god Horus, which was later taken over by goddess Isis during the New Kingdom period.

The main Hathor temple was situated at Dendera north of Luxor on the river Nile. Other Hathor temples could be found in Egypt



Ramses with double shemti crown



Nefertari as goddess Hathor

at Atfih, Kusae, Deir el-Medina and Gebelein.

At her Dendera temple, Hathor also formed a holy trinity with her son Horus and music god Ihi. Like Horus her eyes symbolized the sun and moon.

An important two week long festival was performed at the Horus Temple in Edfu south of Luxor, to which the Hathor statue traveled from Dendera up the Nile River on a holy barge for an annual holy marriage ceremony which was took place in third summer month.

The Egyptian Pantheon

The Egyptian pantheon was based on a most complex mythology with over 500 gods being worshipped and all interacting with each other during the Old and Middle Kingdom Period.

During the New Kingdom Period the number of gods increased even further to over 1,500. It is important to understand that Egyptian gods played different roles in various parts of the country and archaeologists still have difficulty distinguishing certain gods today, as their roles were very similar. It could be assumed that in some cases the same gods had different names or various gods were responsible for the same or very similar tasks.

An ancient papyrus document housed at an Italian museum in Turin records only eleven gods at the start of Egyptian history, who were worshipped for 7,700 years. Sun god Re was seen as king of gods and humans, but after some time he retired and became the main god of heaven still having the same powers as on earth.

After this, other gods started to inherit positions and for example god Osiris, another king of gods in Egypt, became master of the underworld. After he died, his son Horus took over that position.

Later sun god Amun replaced Re as key god during the New Kingdom period, just to mention a few to explain the basic pantheon concept.

The Main Beliefs

There was only one cosmic

unity and bridge between god and humans. Goddess Ma'at for example symbolized the all important principle of the overall order, harmony and balance of all things.

Egyptians believed that gods were all time present every day and minute. Therefore every Egyptian aspired to live a god abiding and most honest life.



Carved out temple hall with 8 Ramses statues

They further believed that gods could send their ba or soul to punish people in case this was necessary.

Egyptian gods were very real, omniscient, universal and not to be doubted. Therefore Egyptians did not need and had a word for religion in their language.

The pharaoh represented his

people in front of all gods and the gods in front of his people. The deceased pharaoh became one with the underworld god Osiris.

Egyptians also believed that during sleep they spent time with gods, therefore dreams were regarded as important messages from the gods.

To show the close links between gods and the pharaoh, gods were depicted to wear the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt and also to hold royal insignia from New Kingdom period onwards.

Ancient Sculpturing Art

Egyptians very early developed a sophisticated art to create monumental and still perfect sculptures. Standing statues were divided into 18 rows of squares to get the proportions right and seated statues into 14 rows. The head-to-shoulder part was partitioned into 3 rows and shoulder to knee into 10 rows, and knee to foot into 5 rows. You will notice that no difference was made between male and female statues - both always had the same height. In addition the same proportions were used for statues, relief scenes and painted tomb walls.

In Egyptian iconography the human being had to be realistic and therefore human depictions always were presented showing the full body and not only portions thereof like busts.

Therefore the typical Egyptian relief and painted presentation of gods and human beings followed a prescribed "twisted" scheme: showing heads in side view, but eyes in frontal view.

Shoulders and the upper body were again created in frontal view. Both arms and all fingers had to be seen following the concept of depicting the full and detailed human being. But pelvis and

legs were again created in side view and, in order to show both legs, they used mostly the walking position.

For relief scenes, both the positive and negative relief techniques were used. The negative technique was used on outside walls, because the sun's shadow made them very realistic and visible from afar.

In the Thebes area we find less relief scenes and more paintings, because of the softer local stone. Nile mud and gypsum was used as underground plaster for paintings.

With regards to paintings, charcoal was used for black hair coloring. Men were painted in red and women in ochre to represent the lighter skin color. Women dresses were normally depicted in blue or green and some times in white.

Archaeologists established that glue and egg white was used as paint binder.

The Development of Sculptures

During the Old Kingdom period from 2,707-2,216BC, only sculptures of single seated men or women were created with stocky postures and sloping shoulders. From the fourth dynasty posture became more angular and proportions more elongated. New standing sculptures and joint sculptures of men and women were introduced.

Also the first seated scribe sculptures appeared, and later the new cube sculpture, which was only used for non-royals, representing a temple guardian role and posture.

During the Middle Kingdom period from 2,119-1,793BC, new monumental stone sculptures of kings were created with a major

change now showing frowning and furrowed faces. The first such sculpture was that of pharaoh Sensuret III and this style was used until the 17th dynasty when royal sculpture production stopped.

During the New Kingdom period from 1,550-1,070BC, royal sculpture production was again started with new styles and extended repertoire of types. New stelophorous statues were introduced from the 18th dynasty with men holding stelas inscribed with a hymn to the sun god.

During the 19th dynasty, figures were also shown holding a naos, or holy music instrument *sistrum* and royal sculptures were depicted as sphinxes holding jars symbolizing the protection of temple entrances.

Others presented pharaohs making offerings to gods in various forms of food sacrifices, or sculptures shown carrying a standard or flag representing the depicted god cults again as worshipping demonstration.

The Nasser Dam Threat

When the Egyptian government decided to build the prestigious Nasser dam both Abu Simbel temples had to be moved in a complex operation which started 1963 and lasted 17 years to escape the rising dam water levels.

They found their new place

of rest 64m higher and 184m moved back on the new Nasser lake borders. The Ramses Temple was cut by over 800 workers into 807 blocks and the adjacent Nefertari Temple into 235 blocks each weighing up to thirty tons.

New artificial hills were built around both temples to resemble the old natural set up now 60m under water. This in itself was a masterpiece of engineering as the Ramses Temple was re-built into a covered concrete dome shaped to prevent the temple chamber collapsing under the enormous weight of the new artificially built hill.

The too fast raising dam waters were another challenge so protecting walls needed to be erected quickly around the old site, so that the ancient temples could be cut into blocks and lifted out.

The move also had another effect resulting from the higher position of the new temple, the bi-annual sun shining onto the statues in the sanctuary in the back of the Ramses temple now happens one day later in February and October each year.

This important rescue operation was coordinated by UNESCO and financed with over \$40 million by over 50 countries.

