

Astene 2017

More treasure hunting in Qurna - the 'Amr Mosque

It is a pleasure to be back at an ASTENE conference. Here to learn new things, meet old friends and make new ones, and find out what members have been working on in recent years. Some of us seem to retrace our steps and don't move far from old obsessions. Those of you who were in Edinburgh in 2001 may remember that I defended the much maligned Qurnawi using Wilkinson's map * Wilko Survey 1830 which showed clearly that they indeed had a mosque that Belzoni was unaware of. Recently I thought it would be good to record what is known about that mosque and if possible to find a photographic image of it in its latter years.

The story of the mosque is naturally part of the story of the old village of Qurna, so we will look first at what little we know about early Qurna itself. * Pococke 1743 First shown on a plan by Richard Pococke of 1743, the village is recorded by many late 18th and early 19th century writers as being in the courtyard area of the mortuary Temple of Seti 1. * map to show position of all. This temple is at the northern end of the line of temples along the valley of Western Thebes, close to the entrance of the road to the Valley of the Kings, and at the start of the wide area of cultivation which got covered by the annual flood. Seti Temple was directly opposite Karnak and the barges which crossed during festivals and ceremonies moored at the eastern side of the temple complex. The course of the Nile wandered east and west over the centuries. Robert Hay comments in 1826 that his 'old friend' the well-known *gemaze* tree that was by the 19th century travellers' mooring spot on the river..... "33 years ago was some distance from its bank". * Gemaze Nestor l'Hote 1829 Here is a drawing of Nestor L'Hote's from the Louvre, Sycamore de Gournah. The *gemaze* tree is a *sycamore or mulberry fig* tree, that can grow to 20m tall, has a wide spread, yellow and red edible fruits and said by some to have been the ancient Egyptian 'Tree of Life'. * Hay Seti Lighter This Hay drawing of 1826 shows clearly the extensive domestic ruins that were in Seti courtyards. It probably also shows the ruins of the Coptic church that was there. * Jeme photo 1927 The Qurna Coptic remains were not as extensive as those of the town of Jeme in the grounds of the Medinet Habu, shown here in 1927, but they were identifiable - with proper walls and arched windows. * Frith Qurna late 1859-60. Francis Frith's photos of late 1859-60 show very simple partially subterranean dwellings, still in the temple area, but slightly further north and east. Bonomi writes of the Frith dwellings, "The circular enclosures, made of mud and broken jars, are the rooms or huts open to the sky in which the labourers sleep". " This village is situated among the ruins of the approaches to the Temple, and now almost deserted, because of the proximity of the river" . *Hay

Seti Temple mud walls to N This drawing, again by Robert Hay, drawn from the south looking north with the temple on his left, shows extensive mud walls and also the inundation. It may well be that a year or two of very high floods washed away many of the mud-brick ruins. *** inundation Borchardt 1929** Here is a photo by Ludwig Borchardt of 1929 showing the inundation on the west bank, and *** inundation by Ram** one by the Ramesseum of (I think) 1908.

Sadly we have no way of knowing what the various ruins in the temple courtyard really were, as they were all cleared away, by nature, by archaeologists, or by locals re-using the bricks, and they were not recorded. *** R Ph Soc Seti 1849** This photo of 1849, from the Royal Photographic Society collection appears to show the ground already clear. *** Seti Temple PC 1906.** This postcard sent from Luxor in 1906 no longer shows the ruins, and these two photos in the Dawson collection ***** **Seti excavations 1910-14** and *** Seti excavations 1910-14 2** which is said to be 1910-14, also show cleared ground. Possibly the tents on the background were those of the Petrie excavations of 1908-9. Petrie was recording some of the stone work in the temple, and looking for tombs in remote valleys. The courtyard areas, which included the site of the Coptic Church, were excavated by archaeologists in the 1970s and 80s, but the excavation reports on the Coptic and post Coptic buildings have not yet been published. We do know that there was a Coptic settlement here, and a Coptic Church, and some of the pottery has been published, but of the buildings and their residents we know almost nothing.

We now look at Lane's map of 1827, ***Lane map Qurna village 1827.** and we see the *Gemmeyzey tree and Sakiyeh* by the river, and then extensive gardens to the south and east of the temple and the "Ruined Village". These gardens were gardens of date palms, and there were walls to keep animals out. *** Hay 1826 Seti and Genena** The walls can be seen on Hay's drawings, and those of other artists. Many of these walls existed until relatively recently. *** Ginena 2000 2.** and *** Ginena** and *** Ginena 2000** There are still some date palms, but not as many. Many Qurnawi families who had originally moved to the hillside from the temple area, and now have been moved off the hillside, owned areas of date palms and used to harvest them – and probably still do.

The earliest map we have which shows the mosque is Catherwood's of 1826. *** Hay Catherwood plan 1826.** It is a small rectangular building with one smaller side addition to the south. Let us look again at Wilkinson's map of 1830. *** Wilko Survey of 1830***. It clearly shows the mosque as a rectangular/squarish building with two small side additions. Next to it there are wells, and just beyond those there are stone ruins and 'Statues of Ramesses 2'. He also writes that there is a "Tomb

of a rebel chief of 1824, now a Sheikh”, somewhere between the Temple and the Mosque, and shows trees on the edge of the cultivation also between temple and mosque. Lane's map had shown just a simple rectangular building for the mosque. [* 1912 map of mosque](#). On the 1912 Survey of Egypt map it is now a rectangular 'Ruined Mosque' with two small protrusions on the eastern side. There are also wells shown to its south. No name is given to the mosque on any of the maps and plans, but it was known as the 'Amr Mosque.

We have located it, but what did it look like? As Belzoni saw no minaret in Qurna, and thus believed there was no mosque, we can presume that it indeed had no minaret. It was already a ruin by 1912, and maybe for many years before that. Can it be found in any of the paintings and drawings of the early 19th century? The obvious place to start looking is Robert Hay's drawings, mainly of 1826. [* Hay 1826 Ginea and Mosque in the back](#) This is drawn from beside the gemaze tree, probably using a camera lucida as usual. Perhaps the donkeys are waiting for tourists to take them to Kings' Valley. If you look through a gap between trees to the left of the drawing there are what look like two buildings on the desert edge. [* Hay 1826 Ginea detail with Mosque](#) and [* Hay Mosque detail](#). The one on the right looks like a small domed building, perhaps a shrine to a Sheikh or even a small mosque. From where he was standing he would not have been able to see the Sheikh shrine as it would have been obscured by the Temple. The left hand image could just be exterior walls to a flat roofed building. None of his other drawings shed further light on these buildings, [* Hay 1826 statue remains](#) but what could be parts of the large Ramesses statues do show in the background of another drawing. [* Seti Nestor L'Hote 1829](#) Nestor L'Hote drew these in 1829. [* Seti Temple Nestor L'Hote 1829](#) In 1829 he also painted a lovely scene of Seti Temple, the peak of the Theban Hills, the Qurn, in the background, and to the south of the stone walls of the temple there is a building and then a pile of huge stones, all as shown on Wilkinson's map. The building looks to be of only one storey, but there is a protrusion in the centre of the roof which could be a small dome.

A painting by Lepsius in 1843/5 [* Seti Temple Lepsius 1843 4,0r 5](#) shows a very strange building to the south west of Seti. It is a pretty strange painting all together, with its various small monuments from the cemetery, and camels walking through completely dwarfed by two stone sphinxes. The artist is sitting presumably in the cemetery to the north of the Temple. The angle is very strange as you can see through to the Colossi during the inundation and also to the Ramesseum which shows to the right in the background to the odd building. [* Seti Temple Lepsius 1843, 4 or 5 crop](#). The strange building where the mosque should be appears to be a circular mudbrick building

with various protrusions on the roof including what could be viewed as a small minaret. There are no other images which are like this and goodness knows what he thought he was drawing.

In 1908-9 when Petrie was working in and around Seti, he makes no mention of any mosque, nor is there any image that I have located in his papers which could be the mosque. However he did find the large pile of stones some of which were indeed broken statues. He wrote, "There lay on the surface two broken colossi of black granite with the names of Rameses 11 and some blocks of stone visible on the ground." He cleaned the area and drew the excavated building, [* Petrie works to S of Seti](#) and says it was built by Nebunnef, a high priest of Hathor who has a tomb at Thebes. "He seems to have built this temple as a small work of his own while directing the adjacent temple building of Sety 1 at Qurnah." The Rameses statue pieces were moved by Dr Stadelmann in the 1989 to Seti Temple and Dr Stadelmann does not agree with Petrie about the Nebunnef building. He told me last year that his wife must publish about their work. A house has now been built on the site.

There is a wonderful air photo taken by Kofler c 1914, [* Seti 1 c 1914](#), which I found by chance on the internet chasing early images. This is after the internal area of the Temple has been cleared, and after any of Petrie's work, but about the same time as the survey of Egypt map. You can see the walls of a simple rectangular enclosure with a door to the north and what looks like the lower part of a window. [* Seti 1 c 1914 detail](#) It is almost full of what looks like a large bushy tree. This is what was then the 'Ruined Mosque'. To the south of it there are various other structures, walls and another tree. These are the well and saqieh. To the west of the outer walls of the temple there is a small circular structure in a depression, which is the shrine of Sheikh Gharib, who led a local rebellion in 1824 as noted by Wilkinson, and written about by a number of 19th century writers.. This shrine is now a square building. I learnt from Mohamed Ali Mansour that the original building became ruined and there were lots of termites, and it was demolished by one Hassan Said Ahmed Hamed who then built the square one over 20 years ago. [* Sheikh Gharib 2003](#) Here is a photo of 2003 and a sadder one of last year. [* Sheikh Gharib 2016](#)

Here is another satellite photo, this time taken in 1979. [* TMP 1979](#) The two satellite photos are the only photographic images we have. The various paintings and drawings do not give a coherent picture. Human memories are sometimes just as unreliable but are an invaluable source of historical knowledge. [* Mo Ali April 2016](#) Mohamed Ali Mansour comes from a large and important Qurnawi family and is a font of local knowledge. He used to live in the Horubat area of

Qurna, * Mo Ali House Qurna. I spoke to him twice about the mosque. In our first talk, in April 2016, he said the walls of the mosque were very old and built by 'Amr himself – they were big like the ones by his house. The mosque was square – the eastern wall was collapsed – it was a very big mud brick wall – like the one near his house – all mud brick. It might have been roofed before but no longer. People still prayed there when he used to go to the *kitab* as a child – his *kitab* was by Sh Tayib mosque on the road. People prayed there even with no roof. The *saqieh* were working and the Bir Badriyya, which was formerly called after its then owner, Abu Taleb.

In November 2016 Mohamed Ali gave me more details, not only about the mosque but about other things including local prayer habits. The inundation used to reach near the mosque. The eastern side was collapsed. There was a big tree inside the walls which were very thick. It was a 'Noboga' tree which has small round fruit with hard stones (*nobog* – also called *sidra*). *Noboga* fruit are very delicious and according to the Holy Book is where Paradise starts. The tree was chosen for that reason. There was one at 'Amr and one at the Sheikh Said mosque at the Habu. When the tree is small it is called '*necheta*'. On the floor was matting made of reeds, called *farsi*. And there were a lot of clay pots for purification before the prayer. There were *zirs* outside – filled from Bir Badriyya. Some of the *zirs* were inside – under the tree. When he was young, not many people prayed, except at the Friday prayers – people were busy in their fields. Mostly people prayed where they were – people were busy and had no time to walk to the mosque, so people prayed where they were. They went to the Eid prayer and then back to work. When someone died they took him there for the prayers. When Horubat got their own mosque they used that; but before – everyone went there. There was a *kitab* there – in his time, it was run by someone called Zen el Abedin. * Kitab

Luxor mosque Here is an old post card photo of the *kitab* in the Abul Haggag mosque in Luxor

Mohamed Ali said, "the mosque was called 'Amr because he built it. He built three, Nag Hammadi, this one and Esna. There is no 'organisation' for mosques, as anyone can build one. The full story should be with the Islamic Dept ... the Dept of Islamic Antiquities – but they will hide the story as they should have recorded it before demolition. Some are complacent – some just turned a blind eye." Mohamed Ali basically said it was a crime.

A U.N. website on Qatar says of the *noboga* or *sidra* tree that it has "roots that reach deep into the earth, fruit and flowers that nourish and leaves that heal, the Sidra became a beacon of comfort in the harsh desert environment, allowing life to flourish. The Sidra also provided shade and shelter to travellers and scholars, who would escape the desert heat, gather together and share knowledge."

The illustration shows a dense tree with wide spreading branches that create a sort of low ceiling – perfect for the ruined ‘Amr mosque, and is what must show on the Kofler photo.

Mohamed Ali now lives in a large house in the New Qurna settlement, * Mo Ali new house but still looks after his extensive agricultural land and is interested in local politics and history. * Mo Ali and plan Here he is looking at his copy of a local plan – he has a large collection of local documents.

Abdu Daramalli, aged 47, who also comes from a long-standing Qurna family from the hillside, agrees with Mohamed Ali and says it was “walls, and trees and bushes. There was a little koranic prayer school held there. The mosque was breaking, and not used as a mosque for a long time – used just as a *kitab*. Then it was knocked down and started again. It had ‘*hasir*’ on the floor.” Hasir means a reed mat, the sort which were used as prayer rugs to cover the pebbles on the ground in a mosque. *Farsi*, which is the word that Mohamed Ali had used, is a specific type of mat made from special reed from salty marshes, but the word *Farsi* can also just mean reeds.

In April 2016, at the site of the ‘Amr Mosque, I met Hagg Ramadan abu Aish aged about 45ish. He has an alabaster factory just south of the mosque – with a big new *zawyeh* and flats above the factory. “The new mosque which is now the mosque of Sheikh Abd er Rahman was built in 1983. He remembers when the old one was demolished and taken away and the new one built – there were some big stones from Seti Temple there. He was given a map when he built the new home that had been drawn from a satellite photo – given to him by the *hokuma*. * Bir Badriyya 1 The *bir* was at the back – where there are still some palm trees. * Bir Badriyya 2. One *bir* and 3 *saqieh*. The *bir* was for people's drinking water, it was the Bir abu Taleb. Abu Taleb was the man/family who looked after it. The 3 *saqieh* belonged to the people whose land they watered – *saqieh* water was for land and animals. The Mosque was built by ‘Amr. His army/men lived in Seti Temple - there were no houses then. He also remembers people living under the ground. (Probably similar to that Frith photo....) He says they chose the place because there was water for ablutions. He said the mosque was of the family who lived there - his family – which was very poor. He remembers (aged 9) the walls were there. Inside was a big *gemaze* tree to give shade – as those who ‘owned’ the mosque couldn’t afford a roof. The people who came - for blessings, weddings, to ask for children etc gave the money to the mosque which paid for the reed mattings. The floor was woven reed matting.” Hagg Ramadan is not as knowledgeable as Mohamed Ali: for instance he had not heard of Deir el Bakhit. which is the big Coptic monastery site opposite his house on Dra abu’l

Naga. This probably explains why he says that it is a *gemaze* tree in the mosque. Given the different shape of these two trees the *gemaze* is unlikely, and the *nobog* perfect.

We now have clear local tradition that the mosque was called the 'Amr mosque as it was built by 'Amr. Naturally this is not accepted historical fact, and there may be no connection whatever. 'Amr ibn al-'As was the commander of the Arab army sent by the Caliph to conquer Egypt in 639, and on December 22nd, 640AD Cyrus of Alexandria entered into a treaty with the Arabs that gave them sovereignty over all of Upper Egypt and the Thebaid. There was no army invasion into Upper Egypt; it was an administrative and financial matter, they just had to pay their taxes to different rulers. In the 7th century this was a Christian area, the main populations on the West Bank were at the town of Jeme and the various monasteries dotted along the hillside. From many local Coptic documents it is clear that in the next century there was no friction between the small but growing Arab population and the local Copts. We know nothing about the local Arab population for some centuries, its housing or its places of worship.

We can look at a few relatively early Muslim things in the area. * Hay tombs In the cemetery there are some early Sheikh shrines, drawn by Hay, and still there today. * Fatimid Sheikh in cemetery Architect and Egyptologist, Dr Horst Yaritz, tells me that one of these is Fatimid. That would make it the earliest known Muslim structure, dating 909-1171 AD. If it was built in memory of an important local holy man, we can presume that there was a settled Muslim community at that date. We have no idea what the date is of another early structure on the edge of the cemetery, which I photographed in 1998. * Minbar cemetery It is a mud-brick *minbar* or pulpit, which was used for the Eid prayers which happened by the cemetery. I have not seen or found references to other similar *minbar*, and thus have no way of dating it. We do know that its real history is so lost in time that a charming local myth has evolved about this being the tomb of the camel of a wandering Sheikh, and when the camel died in this place his master built this as a tomb for him. This story comes from the need to explain the odd shape of the unusual and partially broken structure, with its humped appearance. Mohamed Ali told me that the Sheikh with the camel used to bring water. When the camel died he made a tomb. But Mohamed Ali also knew it was built for the Eid prayers and was indeed a *minbar*. I found it very interesting that a man as clever as he indubitably is, can believe two totally different histories of the one structure at the same time. Sadly the *minbar* is now even further neglected and broken and I fear will be struck by a lorry soon and disappear.

The Mosque of Abu'l Haggag in Luxor has a Fatimid minaret. * Fatimid minaret Luxor mosque. The mosque is now named after Abu'l Haggag who was a Sufi Sheikh born in Baghdad who came to Luxor and died here in 1243. Many people think that it was him who built the mosque, but if the minaret is Fatimid which is agreed, then the mosque pre-dated Abu'l Haggag. Some people say that it was also 'built by 'Amr. If an early mosque had been 'built by 'Amr', what might it have looked like? It is agreed that he did indeed build the 'Amr Mosque in Fustat, now part of Cairo, in 642. The **Mosques of Egypt** volume says that nothing remains of the original one, which measured 17 x 29m. It had "walls of mud brick and a roof of split palm trunks, supported by palm trunk columns and covered with a thatching of palm leaves and mud. The floor was strewn with pebbles." I do not know what evidence the writers have for this description, but it describes a simple building of the sort that could have been found in Qurna or almost anywhere in Egypt at that time and many centuries later. It was completely rebuilt in 673, only 30 years later, with four minarets.

Buildings can disappear and change fast anywhere in the world, and this should be remembered when thinking about what the mosque might have been like in times past. * Omda Gabr Mosque. The current mosque of Omda Gabr, just to the east of Seti temple on the road to the river, surprised me when I first saw it in 1999. * Omda Gabr Mosque 1997 2 It had replaced a very simple building with an outer court with reed mats, a tree and some timber awning to give shade. * Omda Gabr Mosque 1997 Its side wall reminded me of other buildings I had seen further south. Here are my photos taken only two years earlier in 1997. There was no domed ceiling, nor any form of minaret. It was a simple building but one that was important to the family of Omda Gabr who were probably the most revered family locally before the arrival of Sheikh Tayib's family in the 19th century. And the Tayib mosque which used to be a fairly simple building in Hasasna * Hasasna mosque 1997 is now a huge place in New Qurna.

If the 'Amr mosque was built by the troops of 'Amr, how and when could this have happened? There is no suggestion that Amr himself came further south than Fustat. However, by 642 he had been sent thousands of troop reinforcements by the Caliph, and, although he himself was busy laying siege to Alexandria, it is recorded that 'Amr sent 20,000 horsemen under his cousin Uqba ibn Nafi to take Makuria – a kingdom in Nubia. He got as far as Dongola and was defeated, but went again in 652. This time it was militarily inconclusive and ended with a negotiated treaty called the Baqt. In Maqrisi's text of the terms, one of them states, "You are to look after the mosque which the Moslems have built in the courtyard of your capital, and you are not to prevent anyone from worshipping in it, or interfere with any Moslem who goes into it and remains in its sanctuary until

he departs from it. And you are to sweep it, keep it lighted, and honour it.” The local Nubians were not being asked to convert to Islam, but they had to agree to look after the Mosque and respect it. It is a long journey from Fustat to Dongola and the troops must have passed through the Thebaid. They will have noticed the many places of worship of other faiths, and will undoubtedly have felt it was important to put a ‘mosque marker’ down for their new faith. If they passed this way 4 times, two times probably being slower on the way back to Fustat, they may well have camped for a few nights in a temple here and there, and had time to build a very simple building for their faith. They will have chosen the sites with care, perhaps in a temple area itself, as at Luxor, or close to a temple which had an existing resident community. Such mosques would probably have been called after ‘Amr, though names might have changed since then.

I have argued before about the importance of the location of the Qurna ‘Amr mosque, but I will repeat it, as I am even more sure of my theory than before. You must imagine the West Bank area as having far less trees and tall vegetation than it has now so that visibility was much better. The Monasteries on the hillside were not ruins - they were filled with worshipping Christians. The Temples and other pharaonic structures were less ruinous than in the late 19th century as they had not been plundered for building materials. From the site of the mosque you could see east and west to the many buildings of the Christians and their predecessors. To the South you could see the Memnon statues and the temple of Medinet Habu, the Ramesseum and other temples, across up the valley to Hatshepsut, and Seti next door. You could see the little shrine on Sheikh abd el Qurna, the monastery on Qurnet Marei, the monasteries of Epiphanius, Deir el Bahari, the huge Deir el Bakhit high on Dra abu’l Naga, and the Coptic church in Seti temple grounds. If you moved much further north, south or west then some of these buildings would be obscured. If you moved east the site would be flooded by the inundation. If you put your marker down here it would be seen by the worshippers, past and present, of the two other religions. It would say clearly “Islam is here”. It did not have to be a large and complicated building - it just had to exist.

This simple building did exist until 1983 when the Rifai family from Horubat decided that they wished to make a new mosque here, * [Qurna mosque 2003](#) named after a Sufi Sheikh that was important to the family, Sheikh abd er Rahman. * [Mosque 2002 Google earth](#). Sadly they did not move the Sheikh’s library to the Mosque, * [abd er Rahman library](#), which used to stand in a special closed mud-brick library-box in Horubat. His collection is not in his new mosque – another piece of history dispersed and getting lost. Like much of the history of Qurna The Mosque of ‘Amr was destroyed before it was recorded. Had the area been excavated by good archaeologists before

redevelopment, and had they published what they found, we would probably know much more about it. I will continue to look for any existing photos of it, Professor Myśliwiec who worked on the pottery from Seti , suggests that I “should make “much ado about the thing” in the internet.” I will have to appeal via social media for anyone who has a photo they or their family took before 1983. Until then apart from one or two other Qurnawi elders whose memories may also be good, or until some archaeologists who worked on the Coptic and post Coptic settlements in Seti might publish their results, I feel I have got to the end of the hunt.

Caroline Simpson July 2017.