

Coptos: the sacred precincts in Ptolemaic and Roman times

In spite of the extensive excavations of Petrie (1893–94) and Reinach and Weill (1910–11) in Coptos, the layout of the temples area remains obscure. **Laure Pantalacci** and **Cédric Gobeil**, heading the joint IFAO/Université de Lyon mission, present new data and current hypotheses about its configuration.

During at least four millennia, the city of Coptos was a major Upper Egyptian centre. Its main advantages were the width of its alluvial plain, its direct access to the mineral riches of the Eastern Desert, and above all its convenient location, on the Nile, near the entrance of the Wadi Hammamat, the shortest road between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea.

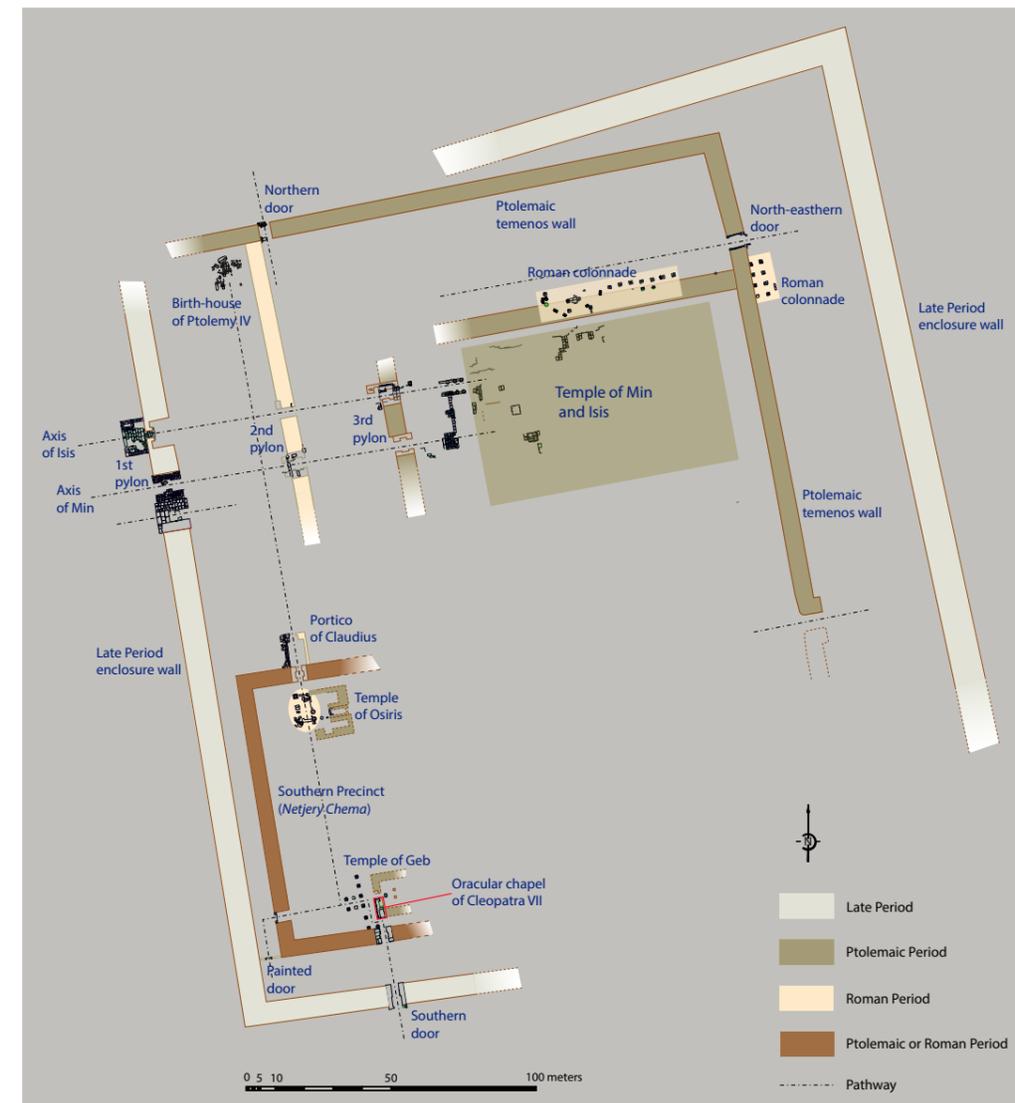
We know little about its long and complex history. Scanty evidence shows that the city enjoyed a prominent position in Upper Egypt through the 3rd and 2nd millennia, though it was overshadowed by its Theban neighbour during the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period. In the course of the 1st millennium BC, the city regained a major position. The religious and monumental focus of the city centre shifted from its old temple, dedicated to Min and Isis, to a southern complex of sanctuaries, called Netjery Shema ('southern precinct'), where the whole Osirian family was worshipped. Under the Thirtieth Dynasty, the sacred city was protected by a huge mud-brick precinct wall (hereafter LP [= Late Period] wall), enclosing these different *temenoi* (see the map on the opposite page).

Nowadays, most of the ancient monuments have been destroyed. The archaeological remains visible on the site date mostly to Ptolemaic and Roman periods. Coptos then reached its heyday, becoming an essential hub on the road network of the Indo-Mediterranean trade market.

At the beginning of the Ptolemaic Period, the religious centre of Coptos was still

surrounded by the thick quadrangular mud-brick wall built under the reign of Nectanebo I (380–362 BC). Today, five openings are visible in this LP wall: three in its western part, one in the south, and at least one more in the north. The last major reconstruction of the temple, as well as some building activities in the Netjery Shema, took place during the reign of Ptolemy II (283–246 BC), by his Greek majordomo Zenon. The refurbished temple of Min and Isis included twin *naoi* accessed through two parallel west-east axes, on which were set two pylons with double doors, separated by a large courtyard. While the first door of Min probably existed prior to the time of Ptolemy II, the first and third doors of Isis were decorated in his reign. It might be around the same time that the main sanctuary was raised on a new platform, about 1 m above the level of its western hall.

The temple of Min and Isis was later surrounded by a smaller mud-brick enclosure (*temenos*) built around the mid-2nd century BC, maybe following a destruction of or damage to the LP enclosure. The question remains open since we only know partially the outlines of both the LP wall and this inner enclosure. At least one door, recently brought to light, was set in its north wall (opposite page) and two in its east wall. In addition, a monumental north-south gateway must have existed to the south, connecting the main *temenos* with the Netjery Shema. A major piece of evidence supporting this assessment



Coptos: a general map of the religious centre.

is the location of the newly identified birth-house of Ptolemy IV (221–204 BC). Located in the courtyard between the first and third pylons, it was built at the end of a south-north processional alley, connecting it to the 'temple of Osiris' in the Netjery Shema. Later on, this processional pathway certainly extended to the southern doors of the Netjery Shema and of the LP enclosure, both of them decorated by the last Ptolemies and the first Roman emperors. This *dromos* passed by the new oracular chapel built by Cleopatra VII (51–30) and Ptolemy XIV, and led to the cemeteries further south.

The first contact of Coptos with Roman rule was harsh, as the city revolted against Octavian and was subdued by Cornelius Gallus in 29 BC. But restorations and new constructions took place soon after. The names of Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero all appear both on Coptite monuments and along the



Western half of the northern door in the Ptolemaic temenos wall (south-north view).

Detail from the base of the 'painted door'. See p. 7.



roads to the Red Sea, showing the involvement of Roman emperors and citizens in developing the Ptolemaic desert roads.

It is through monumental remains that we can still detect the numerous changes that occurred over a relatively short time – the first 60 years AD or so. Following the excavations of Petrie and Weill/Reinach, about 25 dedicatory inscriptions documenting lavish building programmes were collected. Nearly all of them refer to the extensive architectural activity of Parthenios, son of Pamin, overseer of the Isis temple estate between the reigns of Tiberius and Nero (17/18–65/66 AD). His stelae credit him with the construction of several walls (one is called *peribolon*) and doors.

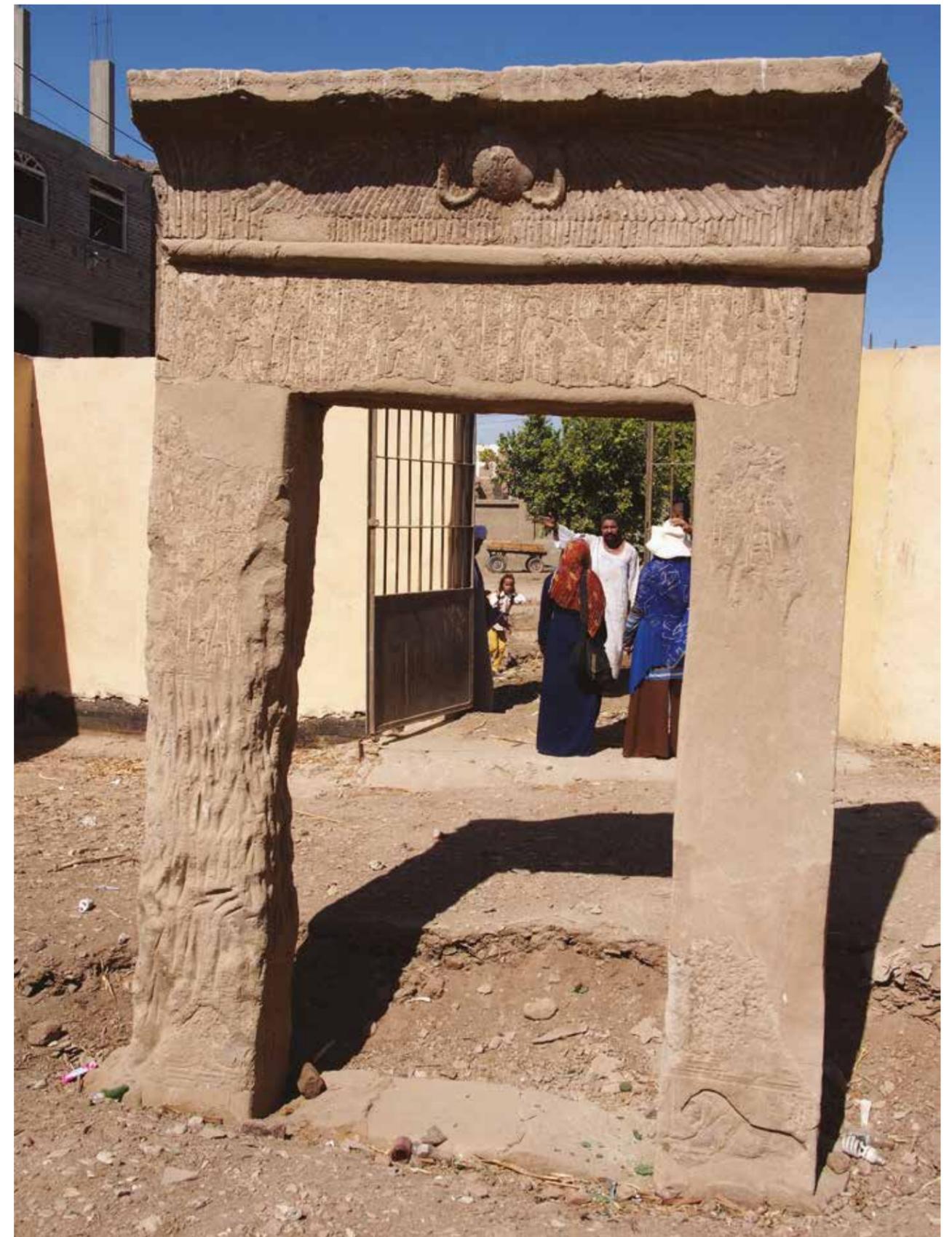
Our excavations to the south-east of the main temple brought to light blocks from three more limestone door frames. The bigger one, erected by Augustus, was inserted in the eastern wall of the main temple *temenos*. It was later reinscribed in Greek by Parthenios, on behalf of Nero (image below). To the west, near the first pylon of Min and Isis, existed a large entrance (excavated in 1911) in the LP wall. The two doors stood at the ends of the east-west street (a kind of *decumanus*) running inside the main *temenos* along its southern

wall. Parallel to this southern street, to the north of Min's *temenos*, but outside the wall, another large street (Ptolemaic?) reached the north-eastern gateway.

During the reign of Claudius, Parthenios embellished the Ptolemaic south-north processional alley with a columned portico flanking the northern doorway of the Netjery Shema. At about the same time, other colonnades were squeezed into the southern part of the same enclosure. It seems that the girdle wall of this complex was rebuilt at that time, at least in its south-western corner – maybe the *peribolon* mentioned by Parthenios. Access to the south-north corridor between the western wall of the Netjery Shema and the LP enclosure was now gained through the 'painted door' (opposite page). It was again Parthenios who dedicated this sandstone door on behalf of Claudius, but this time in demotic, maybe because that door was mainly used by Egyptian temple staff. Running along the east wall across the main *temenos*, another corridor was entered through a small doorway, which, given its modest size, might have been used only by temple staff.

Inside the main temple *temenos*, Roman rule brought about yet more changes. The second

Lintel of the eastern door, with dedication of Parthenios on behalf of Nero.



The 'painted door', dedicated by the temple estate manager Parthenios to the emperor Claudius,



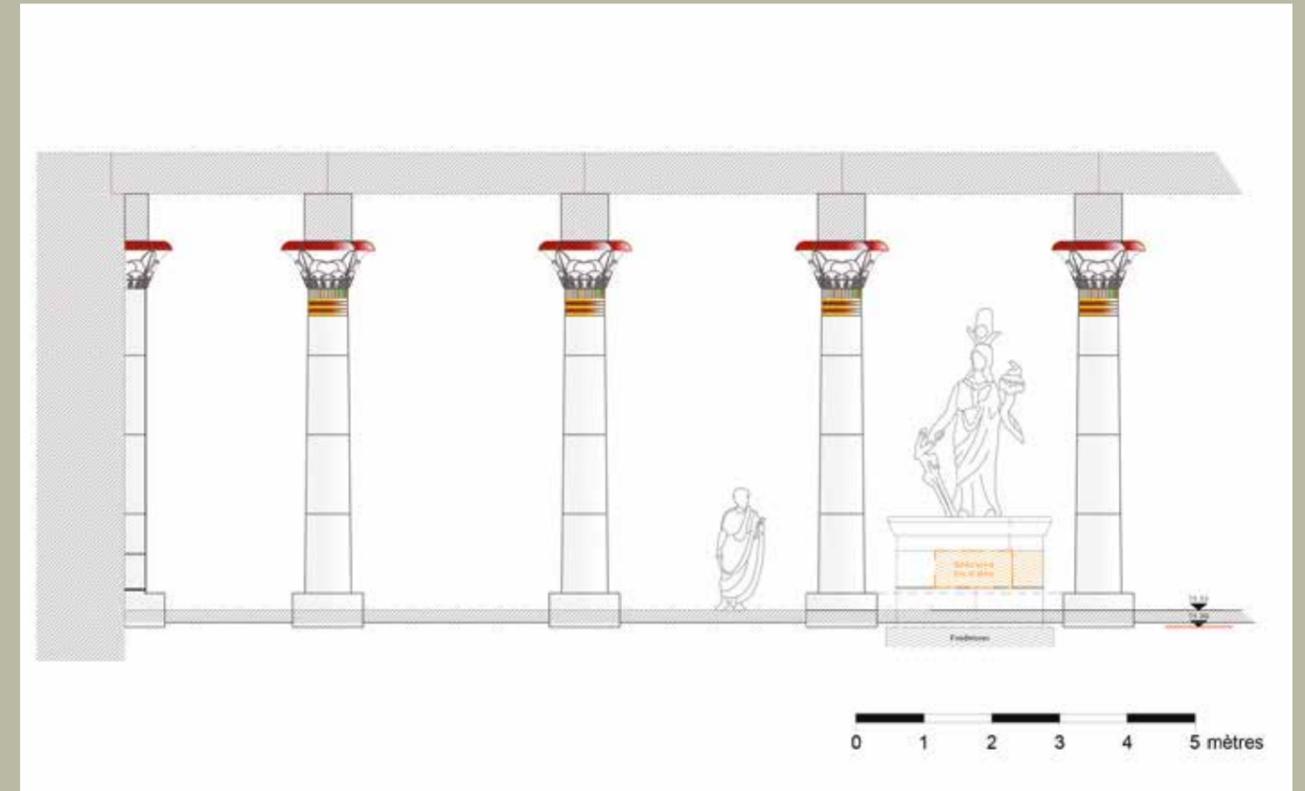
The northern colonnade, with the north wall of the main temple to the left.

pylon was built under Nero, dividing the large Ptolemaic front court of the main temple. But the most spectacular novelty was the levelling of the mud-brick wall encircling the Min and Isis temple and the installation of long, paved colonnades (image above) on its levelled top, about 1 m above the inner floor level. At the back, these colonnades were closed by a thin mud-brick wall. They thus formed porticos or columned streets in a typical Greek style, accessible from within the *temenos*. Between the wall and the front columns were arranged rows of small rooms whose purpose is still unknown. Whatever activity took place there, their number suggests that the space between the temple and his girdle wall was now open to a wider public.

Changes were also introduced to cultic practices. The pharaonic sanctuary of the goddess Isis was still in use. But in addition, a colossal bronze statue now stood in an open chapel inserted at the corner of the northern and eastern colonnades, overlooking the old temple (opposite page, top). The statue has now disappeared, but all the blocks of its inscribed limestone pedestal, dedicated by an Arab merchant under Vespasian (AD 70), are still preserved *in situ*.

Many of the structures built in Ptolemaic and early Roman times were later dismantled or destroyed as the *temenoi* were turned into a fortress at the end of the 3rd century. In modern times, the search for *sebakh* caused further serious destructions in the sacred area. Nevertheless, the overall layout of the centre begins to surface slowly. Further work is planned to investigate the transformations that occurred in and around the temples, while an *anastylosis* programme (the reconstruction of a ruined monument using, as far as possible, its original architectural elements) aims at restoring some of the structures described (opposite page, bottom).

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Top: Reconstruction of the north-eastern corner of the Roman colonnade with the statue of Isis.



Left: The *anastylosis* of the eastern doorway in progress (2015).