Chapter Two
Abydos: Inventing a Landscape

Abydos is located about three hours north of Luxor. The site is located in Upper Egypt, which is south of Cairo and the Nile Delta. Most modern visitors come to see the New Kingdom mortuary temple of Seti I (1306–1290 BC), set on the west bank of the Nile at the edge of the green cultivated land. Two kilometers back from the beginning of the desert a sharp bay of cliffs rises. Up against these cliffs are a number of burial sites, including one complex that may have been the tomb for the Middle Kingdom king, Senwosret III (1878–1841 BC), and then a much more ancient group of burials located at Umm al-Qab. The scene will strike a visitor to other sites along the Nile as conforming to a common pattern—mortuary sites built along the western desert. The visitor could be forgiven for conflating Abydos with other sites. Our interest in this chapter will be to examine not how ancient Abydos fit into a common pattern, but how it functioned as the home for a unique narrative. For a time the narrative that defined its important features shaped the Egyptian hope for the afterlife.

The narrative that overlaid Abydos is that of Osiris. The Greek philosopher Plutarch, in the second century AD, set down the narrative of Osiris in an essay entitled “On Isis and Osiris.” This essay, dense as it is with references to Greek philosophy, is virtually useless in our effort to understand the narrative of Osiris as it would have been understood in the Old and Middle Kingdoms of Egypt, a time spanning from about 2650 to 1700 BC—two to three thousand years before the lifetime of Plutarch. The ancient Egyptians did not preserve the kind of mythical narratives that have come down to us from the Greeks. The reason for this lack of sustained narrative is evident from the nature of the earliest sources—which tend to be embedded within texts that had specific funerary use. The following is an “utterance” from the Pyramid Texts:

O my father the King, the doors of the sky are opened for you, the doors of the celestial expanses are thrown open for you. The gods of Pe are full
of sorrow, and they come to Osiris at the sound of the outcry of Isis and Nephthys. The souls of Pe clash (sticks) for you, they smite their flesh for you, they clap their hands for you, they tug their side-locks for you, and they say to Osiris: Go and come, wake up and sleep, for you are enduring in life! Stand up and see this, stand up and hear this which your son has done for you, which Horus has done for you. He smites him who smote you, he binds him who bound you, he sets him under your eldest sister who is in Qdm. Your eldest sister is she who gathered up your flesh, who closed your hands, who sought you and found you on your side on the river bank of Nedit. (Faulkner § 1004–1008)

We will examine this text in more detail near the conclusion of this chapter, at which point many of the details will make more sense, but for now we can make some general observations. The beginning of this utterance, like so many others, addresses the deceased king, who in his death was identified with Osiris. The speaker is identified with Horus, the son of Osiris and the avenger of his murder. Despite the fact that the mythical narrative is alluded to rather than told, its basic elements are clear enough: Osiris was murdered; his sisters Isis and Nephthys gather his scattered body; his son Horus must avenge him. By the Middle Kingdom, these events had been firmly attached to the landscape of Abydos. The purpose of the passage is not to tell an entertaining story, but rather to provide the deceased king with the words and knowledge that he will need in order to gain his resurrection.

Our contention in this chapter is that parallel to the growth in importance of the narrative of the death and resurrection of Osiris, the landscape of Abydos also increased in importance. The landscape was tied to the coattails, so to speak, of a powerful narrative that promised eternal life to ancient Egyptians. The Pyramid Texts, known to us by their preservation within the interior of some late Old Kingdom pyramids, are a topo-creative theological work that came to supply the landscape of Abydos with meaning.

The experience of ancient visitors to Abydos would be unknown to us were it not for the survival of a large number of stelae erected there that testify to the significance of this landscape. These stelae function as topo-reflective texts that inform us about the way Egyptians during the Middle Kingdom experienced and understood the landscape of Abydos. We could call them miniature travel narratives, although they are certainly not as verbose as the travel narratives penned by the Christian pilgrim Egeria or the Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr (who we will encounter in chapter four). In these stelae we find our only remaining evidence for an annual sacred drama reenacting the death and resurrection of Osiris.