

Story of a Stamp: Abu Simbel - When geography moved a monument

David Ogden (ESC 460)



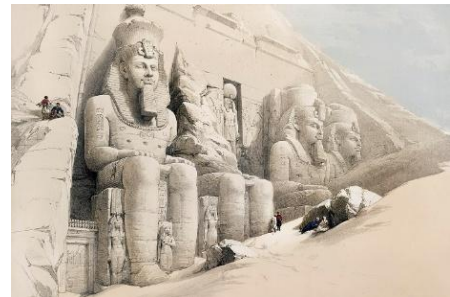
Abu Simbel temple in all its sandstone glory, on stamps of 1914, 1972 and 2025

Among Egypt's many stamps showing monuments, those with Abu Simbel are more than just attractive views of ancient stonework. They tell a story in which archaeology, geography, and modern engineering all play starring roles.

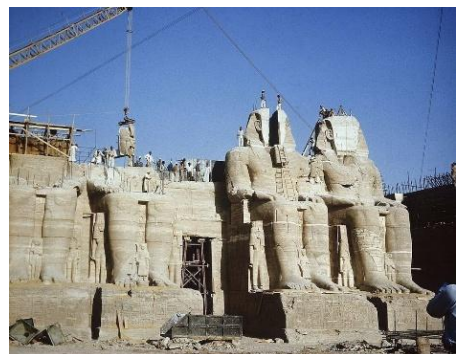
The Great Temple of Ramesses II was carved into a Nubian cliff in the 13th century BC, far from Egypt's traditional heartland. Today the site lies on the western bank of Lake Nasser, some 230 km south-west of Aswan. Its location was no accident. This was frontier country, close to the second cataract of the Nile, where temples served as bold political statements as much as religious ones.

The four colossal seated statues of Ramesses II dominate the 20m temple façade and remain instantly recognisable. Smaller figures of his queen Nefertari and their children stand at his feet, while carved reliefs inside the temple celebrate the pharaoh's military prowess, especially his much-boasted victory at the Battle of Kadesh.

Anyone sailing up-river would have been left in no doubt about who controlled this stretch of the Nile. Geography mattered: Abu Simbel was designed to be seen from the river, Egypt's main artery of power and movement.



The façade drawn by David Roberts in 1839; and preserved for ever by being cut into pieces in the 1960s



By the mid-20th century, however, the very geography that once gave the temples their authority threatened to erase them. The Nile was no longer just a sacred river; it had become an engineering system. The creation of Lake Nasser meant Abu Simbel would disappear beneath the unless something extraordinary was done. In 1968, the entire complex was dismantled, cut into ten-ton blocks, and rebuilt on higher ground as part of the International Campaign (*followed on next page...*)

A Note from our new Membership Secretary

Ahmed Abouesh (ahmed@abouesh.com)

Membership & Communications Update: The Circle has begun the gradual rollout of a new membership database designed to modernize and improve administration and member communications.

The new system will help to maintain membership records, streamlining renewals and improving electronic communication through email updates, announcements, polls, and other interactive features to encourage member participation and engagement.

As part of this effort, the Circle is exploring new ways to connect members electronically and foster a more active and collaborative Society experience.

As this transition is carried out carefully and manually, members may be asked to confirm or update their contact information. We seek your patience during this process as we work to ensure that records are accurate and properly integrated into the new system.

We aim to create a more efficient, connected, and engaging experience for members while preserving the Circle's scholarly and sharing spirit.

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to Save the Monuments of Nubia, overseen by the Polish archaeologist Kazimierz Michałowski. An artificial, domed hill was built to recreate the original setting — a remarkable feat in its own right.

Several Egyptian stamps have featured Abu Simbel, beginning with the 1914 issue (SG 81). My favourite is the 1972 airmail 85m stamp (SG 1171), which shows the relocated temple beside Lake Nasser. The setting, and the rich mix of brown, yellow ochre and greenish-blue tones, make it especially appealing.



Nations as far distant as Korea and Ghana issued charity stamps in aid of the international appeal to save the temples



Many other countries around the world supported Unesco's appeal by issuing stamps featuring Abu Simbel, highlighting the need to save the Nubian temples.

Yet the rising waters did not threaten only monuments. Dozens of Nubian villages were also submerged. Between the late 1950s and early 1960s, tens of

thousands of Nubians were relocated, many of them moved north to planned settlements such as Kom Ombo. Modern though these villages were, they were often ill-suited to traditional river-based ways of life. While Abu Simbel's temples were carefully saved and reborn, Nubian communities experienced a quieter, far less celebrated displacement.