In the winter season of 1901–1902, a team of archaeologists from the Egyptian Research Account was engaged, under the general direction of Flinders Petrie, in the excavation of the temenos wall of the temple of Seti I at Abydos. During the course of their excavations, the archaeologists discovered a previously unknown structure lying directly behind the temple—the Osireion, or cenotaph of Seti I—and Petrie detailed his wife, Hilda, and a colleague, Margaret Murray, to explore the structure the following season. While waiting for the workmen to clear the entrance passage of the Osireion, Murray passed the time by making facsimile drawings of a selection of Coptic graffiti visible on the walls of the Seti temple. This corpus of epigraphic material, brought to the attention of the academic community as something of an afterthought in Murray’s publication on the Osireion, has since come to play a key role in virtually every discussion of the temple’s late antique history.1

The Coptic graffiti from the Seti temple are unique in that almost all of them were written by or for monastic women.2 Murray took this as a clear indication that the temple had served as the site of a Christian women’s monastery, or “nunnery”, in late antiquity, a claim which has been repeated almost verbatim in a number of subsequent publications but only rarely subjected to any

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2 Although in Classical epigraphy carved or scratched inscriptions (graffiti) are distinguished from painted inscriptions (dipinti), in Egyptian usage the term ‘graffiti’ is commonly used for inscriptions of both types; in terms of their mode of production, the Coptic inscriptions from the Seti temple are technically all dipinti. For these terminological conventions, see H.-J. Thissen, “Graffiti”, in W. Helck, E. Otto, and W. Westendorf (eds.), Lexikon der Ägyptologie, 11 (Wiesbaden, 1977), cols. 880–881; A.J. Peden, The Graffiti of Pharaonic Egypt: Scope and Roles of Informal Writings (c. 3100–332 B.C.) (Leiden, 2001), p. xx.
kind of detailed analysis.\textsuperscript{3} In the pages that follow, I will examine the evidence and assumptions upon which this “nunnery hypothesis” has been based, considering in particular the heuristic value of epigraphic evidence in determining the monastic nature of an archaeological site. The limitations of the existing scholarship make it difficult, if not impossible, to conclusively prove or disprove Murray’s claim. A comprehensive study of the Coptic graffiti from the Seti temple, including the re-edition of the texts recorded by Murray and an epigraphic survey of the temple’s present condition, remains a major desideratum, and in the absence of such a study any commentary on the graffiti must be provisional to some degree. I would like to suggest, however, that while the inscriptions in the Seti temple point indisputably to the presence of monastic women at the site, they do not, \textit{a priori}, serve to identify the temple as the site of a monastery. Moreover, an alternative interpretation of the graffiti— that they were produced by the nuns during periodic visits to the temple, perhaps in association with ritual observances connected to the cult of a local saint—may better suit the evidence at hand.

The Temple of Seti I at Abydos

The site of Abydos (Egyptian \textit{ṣḥḏw}, later \textit{ⲡⲃⲟⲧ}), which comprises the modern villages of el-ʿAraba el-Madfuna, Beni Mansur, and Deir Sitt Damyana, is located on the west bank of the Nile in the eighth Upper Egyptian nome, roughly 160 km north of modern Luxor. For nearly three thousand years, Abydos was one of the preeminent religious centres in all of Egypt, serving as the burial-place of the kings of the 1st and early 2nd Dynasties and, from the Middle Kingdom onward, as a national centre for the cult of the god Osiris.\textsuperscript{4} The principal Osiris temple, originally constructed in the Old Kingdom, was razed early in Dynasty 12 and a new temple was built on the site in the late twentieth/early nineteenth

\textsuperscript{3} A notable recent exception to this rule is S. Bucking, “Now You See It, Now You Don’t: Dynamics of Archaeological and Epigraphic Landscapes from Coptic Egypt”, in M. Rutz and M. Kersel (eds.), \textit{Archaeologies of Text: Archaeology, Technology, and Ethics} (Oxford & Philadelphia, 2014), pp. 59–79. In his analysis of the site, Bucking seeks to recontextualize the epigraphic material with respect to the architecture of the temple and the surviving late antique archaeological remains; his conclusions will be discussed in greater detail below.