Maintaining Egypt

Religion

When one visits Egypt today, manifestations of its ancient religion are visible in many of its monuments, be they temples or tombs. Regardless of this abundant architectual evidence, and the myriad ancient texts relating to the subject, it remains difficult to understand completely the religion of the ancient Egyptians. One reason is that we are seeing only some manifestations of religious practice and reading only a portion of the writings related to it. Our knowledge is the sum of fragments from different periods, and we therefore cannot grasp the totality of Egyptian religion at any one point in time. Instead, we are cobbling together the known evidence from three thousand years of Egyptian history, most of which dates to the New Kingdom or later. Thus we have formed only an imperfect view of the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, which may actually have evolved in ways far different from those that we presume.

State Religion

There is virtually no record of collections of 'national' Egyptian myths written during the Pharaonic period – the

majority of such tales come to us from classical Greek and Roman versions. Furthermore, the ancient Egyptians produced no single text such as the Torah, the Bible, or the Quran that explains their religion or serves as a guide to their rituals and beliefs. However, by examining the extant evidence, we can gain some understanding of the Egyptians' basic belief systems, remaining aware that we are handicapped by our limited knowledge and personal biases. In terms of contemporary belief systems, ancient Egyptian religion might best be likened to Hinduism: both are polytheistic; in both, images of gods are worshipped in temples; and in both, each god has its own priesthood to celebrate the divine cult, control the temples and access to the gods, and organize festivals in honor of the god.

Religion permeated every aspect of Egyptian life, which is not surprising given that the Egyptians even considered the head of their state to be a god. Thus, religion played a political and economic role, as well as a spiritual one, in the daily lives of the Egyptians. In ancient Egypt, as is so often the case in other places and at other times, a formal 'state' religious structure existed side by side with vernacular, more informal modes of worship practiced privately by individuals. These two systems were not mutually exclusive, but were complementary, and to some extent they fulfilled different cultural, social, and political functions.

State religion in Egypt can be defined as the celebration of the cult of the chief god of the pantheon, as well as of the king who was the main manifestation of a divinity on earth, and who acted as the physical link between the Egyptians and their gods. Egypt's state religion occupied itself with building the country's major temples, filling them with wealth, and providing them with priests to celebrate the cult of that temple's god as a key component of the maintenance of *maat*. The daily rituals carried out in these temples ensured the continuation of the cosmos and the maintenance of order both in the land of Egypt and in that of the gods. In addition to regular temple rituals that took place several times each day, special festivals for the god or the king were also celebrated. But temples were not just houses for the gods; they played an important economic role by employing people, collecting taxes, and redistributing wealth throughout Egypt.

Throughout the Old Kingdom, Egypt's 'chief' god was the sun god, Re. In the Middle Kingdom, when the 12th Dynasty assumed power, its kings raised their local god, Amun, to the rank of 'chief' god and fairly soon syncretised

Amun with the original head of the pantheon, Re, thereby creating the god Amun-Re. The quintessential creator god, Amun-Re remained the dominant deity throughout the rest of ancient Egyptian history.

As the head of the state and the priesthood, in addition to being a god himself, the king was in charge of maintaining Egypt's good relations with its divinities so that the land and its people would prosper. To achieve this goal, the king (and his priests) symbolically entered a type of contractual agreement with the gods in which they (and the people of Egypt) agreed to live a life filled with balance and rectitude (*maat*), to respect the gods, and to provide prayers and offerings to the gods. In return, the gods would care for Egypt, safeguard its boundaries, ensure the health of its people, and guarantee that its crops and livestock flourished. Such a relationship or contract is commonly found in other religious traditions and writings, including the Old Testament. The people of Egypt revered the chief god and their king, but they did not necessarily focus their private devotions on them. In confronting the challenges of everyday life, they might choose from amongst the myriad gods of the Egyptian pantheon, depending on whose help was needed (see box on gods). This can be considered analogous to asking for help from specific saints or the Virgin Mary in the Catholic or Orthodox churches. In some ways, the Egyptians viewed all the different divinities in their pantheon as different aspects with specific characteristics and functions of a single great force that ruled the universe.

Maat: The Foundation of Religious Belief and the Moral Code

The most important religious concept in ancient Egypt was that of *maat*. The foundation of the state, and indeed of the whole culture, rested upon this idea. *Maat* is difficult to define precisely, but it might be explained as living a life that promotes and supports what is perceived as the divine order of things. It has been translated variously as 'truth', 'order', 'rectitude', or 'balance/equilibrium', and is the opposite of *isfet*, or 'chaos'. The idea of *maat* was also personified as the goddess Maat, a daughter of Re, and depicted as a woman with a feather (the emblem of Maat) in her hair, or just by the feather of truth alone. Ideally, in order to live eternally after death, one's heart had to be equal in weight to *maat* when weighed in a balance, indicating that one had lived a good life. (Fig. 60.)



Figure 60. The king was often shown offering seated images of the goddess Maat to other deities (here, to the god Ptah at Karnak), implying that the king was responsible for maintaining maat in Egypt. Photo Salima Ikram.

The Pantheon

The Egyptian pantheon contained over eighty divinities. These rank from the more important gods who were established at the dawn of Egyptian history and were involved with the creation of the world to minor deities who played a crucial role in different aspects of Egyptian life and death. The Egyptian word for 'god' was *netjer*, which also had the meaning of 'power'. The hieroglyph for this word is surprisingly abstract: a tall pole wrapped with a linen cloth fluttering loose at the pole's top – in essence, a 'cult flag' of the kind that stood before temples.

The major gods controlled specific spheres, although some of these could overlap; many of these gods also were associated with particular geographic areas or natural phenomena. Thus Re, a sun god, was a creator god and ensured that the sun completed its cycle each day so that the world continued to exist, whereas the goddess Hathor presided over the bringing

into being, or birth, not only of human beings but also some of the products of the earth, such as turquoise and copper. Some gods were manifestations of a local presiding spirit or feature, such as Meret-Seger, the goddess of the mountain that towered over the Valley of the Kings on the Nile's west bank at Thebes. Others, such as Maat, were the personification of a concept.

In addition to the major gods, each city had its own god (often these divinities were part of the larger pantheon too), who was more important in local worship than the major state deities were. In some cases, a small village or even a city neighbourhood might have its own demi-god, that is, a local person who had become deified and was regarded as being particularly effective in granting people's wishes. One such individual was Heqaib at Elephantine (see Chapter 4). This canonization of local people is still part of heterodox faith in many countries today, although generally frowned on by most religious bureaucracies. Furthermore, the Egyptians were open to accepting and absorbing divinities from different cultures: when foreigners settled in Egypt bringing their own gods with them, the Egyptians readily incorporated these deities into their own pantheon. Sometimes the foreign gods would syncretise with Egyptian ones, so that the Near Eastern Baal became associated with Seth, the Egyptian god of chaos and foreign lands. Otherwise, deities such as Astarte or Anat were simply added to the Egyptian pantheon. Clearly, in terms of religion, the Egyptians were inclusive rather than exclusive.

As a result, the Egyptian pantheon is very large, with festivals and traditions that link it to the peoples of Africa as well as the Mediterranean and Levant. Religious traditions from all the diverse areas of Egypt were incorporated into the fabric of the country's faith. This resulted in several varying, but equally acceptable, myths about creation and the world order, as well as in the presence of different but equally important divinities that shared attributes and were responsible for the same things.

By the New Kingdom, many of the major Egyptian gods had been organized into groups of three (triads, or trinities) made up of two adult deities and a juvenile god. (Fig. 61.) These groups are sometimes referred to as families, with a mother, a father, and a child, but this description does not always hold true. Members of the group sometimes were exchanged, based on local beliefs, or were grouped in threes to represent the idea of a plurality (see box showing major gods). Furthermore, there is often no text that describes a clear family relationship for the three individuals. Nevertheless, part of the strength of these deities came from their being grouped into a triad because



Figure 61. The Theban triad of Amun, Mut, and Khonsu were the primary focus of Karnak Temple. Photo Salima Ikram.

three was considered a magical number and because the triad included representations of both the male and the female force that made possible the mystical and actual act of creation. Triads were often of local importance and their members were worshipped together as well as separately. Some of these groupings are interesting because of the strong contrasts between the characters of the gods in them and the balance that they struck. Thus, in one triad, the male god Ptah, a creator, was paired with the female goddess Sekhmet, who was often seen as a destroyer, with the third member of this triad, Nefertum, also a creator god, regarded as their complementary partner or even as their son. However, not all gods fit into triads, and many were worshipped individually.

Most Egyptian gods were depicted both anthropomorphically and zoomorphically, as they were generally linked to animals in some way. This is probably because early Egyptian religion was inspired by the natural world and natural phenomena, including animals, were associated with the gods. To the Egyptians, animals seemed to be endowed with supernatural powers, which, together with the animals' 'otherness' from humans, suggested a link with the divine. The Egyptians associated specific animals with particular deities that either shared the animal's attributes and strengths or was thought to protect humans against whatever was threatening about that creature. For



Figure 62. Anubis, the god of embalming, was also a god of travel and was in charge of helping people to pass from this world to the next. Images of Anubis, such as this one now in the Hildesheim Museum, were a vital part of funerary equipment and were particularly common in tombs of the later periods of Egyptian history. Photo Nicholas Warner.

example, the goddess Selqet was simultaneously associated with scorpions and thought to be able to prevent or cure their stings.

The Egyptians were keen observers of nature and carefully selected the divine properties they identified with specific creatures. Thus, the sun god Re is often represented as a lion, the king of the beasts and a creature that basks in the sun. Moreover, the lion's mane, which radiates out from its face, resembles a sun-disk. Thoth, the god of wisdom and writing, is most commonly depicted as an ibis or as an ibis-headed man. The beaks of ibises are long and thin, resembling pens, and Egyptians often saw the birds fossicking in the dirt, searching for worms, or, as the Egyptians might have shaped the metaphor, seeking knowledge. Some gods are represented not by just one animal, but by an amalgam of several, creating a 'super' animal. The 'hawk' that represents the god Horus is actually a super-raptor, a combination of the largest, fastest, strongest, and most beautifully marked of these birds. The god Anubis is actually a combination of a dog, a jackal, a fox, a wolf, and a hyaena and is thus a super-canid.[1] (Fig. 62.) All of these creatures could



Figure 63. Egyptians believed that sacred animals contained part of the spirit of a god. While the animals lived they were prayed to and cared for, and after their deaths they were mummified and buried with honour. This ram mummy, sacred to Khnum, comes from Elephantine, and is now in the Cairo Museum. Photo Anna-Marie Kellen.

be found in the desert, particularly where the dead were buried. Therefore, Anubis, as god of mummification and defender of the dead, was thought to give protection against any harm that his creatures might wreak upon a dead body. Sometimes the exact combination of animals used in the creation of a composite creature is less clear: we still cannot identify which animals the Egyptians associated with the god Seth, for example. Scholars have suggested a combination of a donkey, an aardvark, and a fox, all creatures of

the desert of which Seth was the master, or the oxyrhyncus fish that ate the phallus of Osiris (see 'The Myth of Osiris' section). It is worth noting that the Egyptian pantheon does not include animals such as the horse or the chicken that were introduced into Egypt later and thus did not play a part in Egypt's origins or in the development of its culture.

From the Late Period until the end of polytheistic Pharaonic civilisation, the Egyptians experienced an upsurge of belief in the intimate relationship between animals and gods. Many temples with resident sacred animals were established, and those that already existed enjoyed a renaissance. According to Egyptian belief, a sacred animal was an animal that was an avatar of a particular god (e.g., ibis for Thoth, cat for Bastet, canid for Anubis), and was differentiated from others of its species by special markings known only to the god's priests. Part of the spirit of the god entered the animal for the duration of its life, and the animal became a manifestation of that god on earth. Sacred animals had oracular and healing powers; they were kept in special pens and thus were more accessible to the populace than were the statues of gods held in conventional temples. Upon their deaths sacred animals were mummified and buried in lavish tombs as befitted a god. The Egyptians believed that the animal's divine spirit then migrated to another animal. One such creature was the Apis bull, the avatar of Ptah. A human analogy would be the Dalai Lama of Tibet, whose spirit is reborn into a succession of new bodies. (Fig. 63.)

Temples

The imposing stone temples that the Egyptians built throughout the Nile Valley were often called *hwt-netjer*, literally, 'houses of the gods'. These monuments were generally constructed of stone so that they could last for eternity, as the gods existed forever. Many temples that we see today were not the result of a single ruler's building program, but were instead a combination of buildings and parts of buildings added by successive rulers, each dedicated to the glory of a particular divinity. For instance, the great temple of Amun at Karnak that we visit today is the result of over two thousand years of building. The earliest Egyptian temples were not stone built, but were made of mud brick or reeds or both; later they were rebuilt or enlarged using stone. Throughout Egyptian history, smaller chapels that were not state supported continued to be constructed from these perishable but easily renewable materials.

A Selection of Gods

Amun, Amun-Re: initially a god of the Theban region who syncretised with Re when Amun became the state god of the 12th Dynasty. His name means 'the Hidden One', and he represents the potential of growth and fecundity. Coupled with the god Re, he personalises the life force and creation. His chief temple was at Karnak.

Anubis: the god of embalming who transports the dead to the Judgement Hall of Osiris. Son of Nephthys. He is shown as a man with a canine head.

Anuket: daughter of Satet and Khnum, and goddess of the cataracts in the Aswan region. She is also viewed as a daughter of Re.

Atum: a major creator god, based at Heliopolis, with chthonic and underworld connections. He is shown either as a man wearing the crown of Upper and Lower Egypt or as a serpent.

Bastet: shown often as a cat and associated with love, beauty, music, and self-indulgence.

Hapy: a god symbolising the Nile's inundation. He is called 'the Lord of the Fishes and Birds', and is depicted as a man with pendulous breasts and a pronounced belly and wearing a long wig.

Hathor: one of Egypt's most important goddesses. She was viewed as sponsor and spouse of the king and, as such, the wife of Horus, as well as the god's nurse. Her name means 'house of Horus'. Additionally, she is a mother goddess and related to female sexuality. She is also the goddess of foreign lands and of the goods that come from these lands. In some myths Hathor is described as the daughter of Re. She is shown as a cow or as a woman with a cow's head.

Horus: son of Osiris and Isis and the personification of the living king. His avatar is a raptor.

Isis: the sister-wife of Osiris and the mother of Horus. She was responsible for Osiris's resurrection, and she sustains and protects the deceased, as well as being the quintessential mother goddess. One of her epithets is Isis, Great of Magic. She is depicted as a woman with a throne as her crown.

Khepri: a manifestation of a creator god and the rising sun, shown as a scarab beetle. Scarab beetles push dung balls through the sand; the Egyptians associated these dung balls with the sun and mistakenly believed that baby beetles spontaneously burst forth from them, thus making the beetle a quintessential symbol of solar creation.

Khnum: the god of the First Cataract who oversees the inundation, and a creator god, forming men and gods and their souls, or *ka*, on his potter's wheel. He is shown as a man with a ram's head; he and his triad are based at Elephantine.

Khonsu: a moon god who is often shown as the son of Amun and Mut. He helps determine people's life span. He is depicted as a young man with the side-lock of youth, crowned by a crescent moon.

Min: one of Egypt's first deities. He is the chief god of male virility and is shown as an ithyphallic mummiform man with a crown of two feathers. He was worshipped primarily at Koptos and also at Karnak, where he was joined with Amun.

Mut: frequently the consort of Amun, Mut is shown either as a woman wearing a vulture headdress or as a woman with a lioness's head. She is a goddess of motherhood.

Nefertum: sometimes viewed as the offspring of Ptah and Sekhmet, he is thought to be a birth-god is associated with the blue lotus/lily (*Nymphaea cerulea*). Depicted as emerging from a lotus/lily or as a man with those flowers as his headdress, he is also the god of perfumes.

Neith: one of the earliest and most powerful of Egypt's goddesses. Her primary function is that of a warrior goddess, although she is also known as a creator goddess. Her main cult center was Sais, and she is generally shown in human form.

Nephthys: both sister and wife of Seth, and sister of Osiris and Isis. She is one of Osiris's chief mourners and, consequently, a goddess who protects the dead. She is shown as a woman with a temple sign surmounted by a basket on her head.

Nut: the sky goddess and important in funerary religion.

Osiris: the first mummy and mythical first king of Egypt who, upon his death, became god-king of the Underworld. His consort is Isis, and his son is Horus.

Ptah: a creator god and the great god of Memphis. He is the god of craftsmen and a 'sculptor of the earth'. He is shown as a man, often mummiform, wearing a blue cap and holding a staff.

Re: the sun god and Egypt's most important deity; he is associated with creation and the continuation of the world. He is shown as a raptor or as a man with a raptor's head.

Satet: the guardian of Egypt's southern border, and spouse of Khnum. She is shown as a woman wearing the White Crown flanked by antelope horns.

Sekhmet: goddess of plagues and destruction but also protector of women. Often regarded as the consort of Ptah. She is shown as a woman with a lioness's head.

Seth: brother of Osiris, and ruler of the deserts and storms. His totemic animal is a strange mixture of beasts, including dogs, donkeys, aardvarks, and perhaps even a fish.

Sobek: god of fertility and water, shown as a crocodile or a crocodile-headed man. He was particularly revered in the Fayyum and at Kom Ombo.

Thoth: a lunar god who is associated with literacy and learning. His animals are the baboon and the ibis.

There were two major types of temples built in Egypt: cult temples, where the cult of a god (or of a group of gods) was celebrated, and funerary, or memorial, temples, which were structures dedicated to the cult of the king as

a god and as a liaison between Egypt's people and the gods. Each temple type had a slightly different function.

Cult temples tended to be located on the east bank of the Nile, where the majority of the population was settled and where the sun, the herald of life, rose. The Egyptians may have chosen the sites for these temples based on mythic events that they believed had taken place at a particular location (e.g., the birth or burial place of a god, or the location of a battle between divinities) or on the topography of the site, such as the shape of a mountain or the presence of a water-course that held religious symbolism for them. Cult temples were dedicated to a primary deity, and if that god was part of a triad, the other two divinities would also be worshipped there. Additionally, small chapels to other gods, including the deified king, would often be erected within the temple precincts, thus extending the group that was worshipped at the site. Cult temples played a pivotal religious, cultural, political, and economic role in the life of the settlements connected to them and drew worshippers from surrounding rural areas. The temples varied in size and complexity depending on the size of the community they served, but every settlement contained some sort of chapel or temple.

Funerary, or memorial, temples were generally constructed on the west bank of the Nile, where the sun set, or died. Every such temple was associated with the burial place of a particular pharaoh. During the Old and Middle Kingdoms these temples were physically connected to the kings' pyramids, but in the New Kingdom and in later periods they were sited at the desert margins, separate from the royal burial place. These temples celebrated the cult of the dead king who had achieved god-head through dying, as well as the cult of the eternal royal *ka*, or spirit. This spirit incorporated the spirits of all the dead pharaohs and was also identified with Horus, the divine ruler of this world, and his father Osiris, the divine ruler of the Otherworld. In addition to the worship of the dead king in all his manifestations, these temples also involved the cults of other deities. In the Old Kingdom, the focus was on Re as the chief state god, together with other selected divinities who were particularly relevant to divine kingship; by the New Kingdom, Amun-Re was the focus, particularly in conjunction with Mut and Khonsu, but also in the company of other deities. These funerary temples, like their counterpart cult temples, played an important part in the religious and economic life of the area, but just as critically, they were involved directly in the maintenance of the surrounding cemeteries.

Temple Architecture

The architecture of temples evolved over time and was in part dictated by the god(s) that a temple served; for example, sun temples were dominated by courtyards open to the light. The majority of cult temples still standing date from the New Kingdom and later; the extant funerary/memorial temples date from the Old Kingdom on and display much greater architectural variation. A commonality of all temples, however, was that the Egyptians believed temples to be not only the mansions of the gods but also, within their walls, a re-creation of the cosmos: the sacred space within the temple precinct evoked the sacred landscape at the dawn of creation. These ideas are particularly apparent in the architecture of cult temples beginning in the New Kingdom and in the architecture of memorial/funerary temples constructed from the end of the 18th Dynasty until the end of the New Kingdom.

Most temples were oriented east–west, in line with the solar cycle. Sometimes this orientation was off, however, because the Egyptians used the Nile as their north–south indicator instead of taking their direction from true north. Thus, where the river bends, the orientation of local temples is skewed to relate to an axis that depends on the river's course. The iconography used within the temple provides clues as to its intended orientation: what was, or was meant to be, the north shows papyrus plants and images of Wadjet, whereas the lily and Nekhbet indicate the south.

The Architecture of Cult Temples

The earliest Egyptian cult temples were constructed of perishable materials that were easily found in each locality. In Lower Egypt the temples consisted of large rooms with arched roofs made entirely of reeds and mud plaster. In Upper Egypt temples were probably constructed of mud brick, as well as of reeds and mud plaster, perhaps with the addition of stone slabs as thresholds and lintels. Initially, all temples were simply one- or two-room buildings, with fetishes of the god on standards outside the entrance. Images of the god, made of ivory, wood, or stone, would presumably have been kept within the temple proper, and had restricted access. Later, images of gods might be made of either gold or silver and other precious materials. Some cult temples, such as that of Min of Koptos, had several monumental stone statues of the god in the open. For these early temples, the sacred area would

Creation Myths

The ancient Egyptians had several myths dealing with the creation of the cosmos and all that it contained. Probably, many of these myths had local origins, but with the unification of the country, they were gathered together and regarded as equally believable, or, depending on a particular situation, one may have been favoured above the others for a time. From the evidence that remains, it does not seem that the Egyptians had difficulty holding onto fairly contradictory concurrent beliefs.

The Heliopolitan Cosmogony is one of the earliest creation myths and originated at the site of Iwnw (Heliopolis in Greek; biblical On), a major solar centre. In this myth, a group of nine gods (the Ennead) created the world. First, the god Atum ('the complete one', 'the all') masturbated (in some stories, he spat) and from his ejaculation created a pair of gods, the male Shu ('air') and his female counterpart Tefnut ('moisture'). They gave birth to Geb ('earth') and Nut ('sky'). (The Egyptians are almost unique in having a male earth god and a female sky divinity.) In turn, Geb and Nut produced two sons, Osiris and Seth, and two daughters, Isis and Nephthys, who were also their brothers' consorts. Clearly, incest was not taboo for gods in Egyptian religion; it was also acceptable for kings, who were regarded as gods. Incest was a taboo for everyone else, however. The tale of Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys leads into the Osiris myth cycle. (Fig. 64.)

An equally important myth, the Hermopolitan Cosmogony, originated in the Middle Egyptian city of Khemnw (the Greek Hermopolis), which was sacred to the god Thoth. In this tale, a group of eight gods, an Ogdoad, consisting of four couples of male and female divinities, personified the elements of chaos, or pre-creation. These were 'hiddenness' or 'hidden potential', personified by Amun and Amunet; 'formlessness', represented by Huh and Hauhet; 'darkness', embodied by Kuk and Kauket; and the primeval waters, incarnated in Nun and Naunet. These deities created an egg that contained the god responsible for creating the other gods, the land, animals, plants, and humans. Thoth was probably this god originally, which was particularly appropriate since an ibis is hatched from an egg. However, Atum was inserted in this role in some versions of the myth.

The Memphite Theology is another significant creation myth. This was probably an old tale, but the most complete version known to us was recorded on the Shabaka Stone (c. 710 BC, Dynasty 25), named after the king who had the myth inscribed on this piece of basalt; another version, the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus (4th century BC), was written on papyrus. In this myth, Ptah created the world by conceiving it in his heart (equivalent to our mind) and then giving it life by articulating or naming each element of the world and its denizens. The idea of thinking of something (*Hu*) and then causing it to exist through the act of speech (*Sia*) is close to the later biblical story of God's creating the world through speaking it; this story also has parallels in Australian aboriginal myths and in other concepts of speaking or singing the world into being. In the Memphite Theology, Ptah created Atum and the Ennead, and, through them, the rest of the world.

Minor variations exist for all of these myths, and sometimes, in the Memphite Theology, other gods, such as Amun-Re, supplanted Ptah as supreme creator, although Ptah remained an important character in the myth. Alternate accounts also exist; for example, in 'The Destruction of Mankind', Re was cast as the supreme being and a self-creator, with other gods, such as Nefertum, also playing generative roles.

have been delineated by a reed fence or a wall of some sort, the entrance to which was marked by a large gateway. With increased government centralization and economic wealth, these simple prototypes gave way to building complexes that, to a large extent, imitated the original perishable materials but used a more lasting medium: stone.

No clearly identified complete cult temples have been found that date from the Old Kingdom. The closest are the 5th Dynasty sun temples at Abu Sir, which were dedicated not just to the cult of the sun but also to the cult



Figure 64. The deities Nut, Geb, and Shu described the physical world of the Egyptians and were frequently depicted in funerary art and referred to in religious texts. Here, Nut, the goddess of the sky, stretches over her husband Geb, god of the earth. They are separated by Shu, the air. Drawing Keli Alberts and Nicholas Warner.

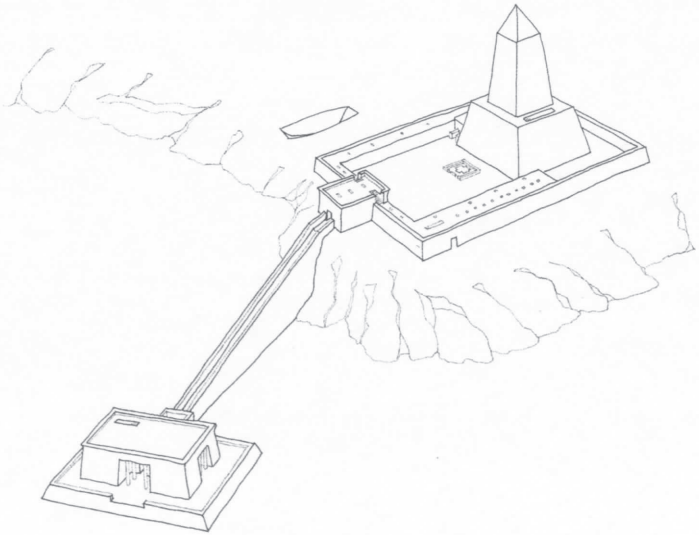


Figure 65. Sun temples were a phenomenon of the 5th Dynasty. These temples were laid out similarly to royal funerary complexes, but instead of the king's burial, the focal point was a squat obelisk atop a pedestal. A Valley temple was connected to the main temple via a causeway. The main temple enclosure consisted of the obelisk, an altar before it, storerooms and smaller rooms on the east, the decorated Room of the Seasons to the west, and a boat pit outside the enclosure, generally on the west. Presumably, boat pits alluded to the voyage of the sun god in the solar barque that he used to cross the heavens. Drawing Nicholas Warner.

of the king. (Fig. 65.) These monuments provided a prototype for temples dedicated to sun gods, and are seen throughout Egyptian history. A wall defines the sacred space, and the major area of worship is open to the sun and to the sky. The main temple furniture consists of a large altar set before a squat obelisk or a pyramidion, where most offerings were given and prayers were recited. Additionally, the Abu Sir temples include small roofed and decorated chambers, but such rooms are not always found in other temples dedicated to solar deities.

Complete Middle Kingdom cult temples are also rare, with the best examples being those at Qasr el-Sagha (unfinished) and Medinet Maadi in the Fayyum, the Horus temple at Thoth Hill in Western Thebes, the temple of Montu at Tod, and portions of the Serabit el-Khadem in the Sinai. (Fig. 66.)

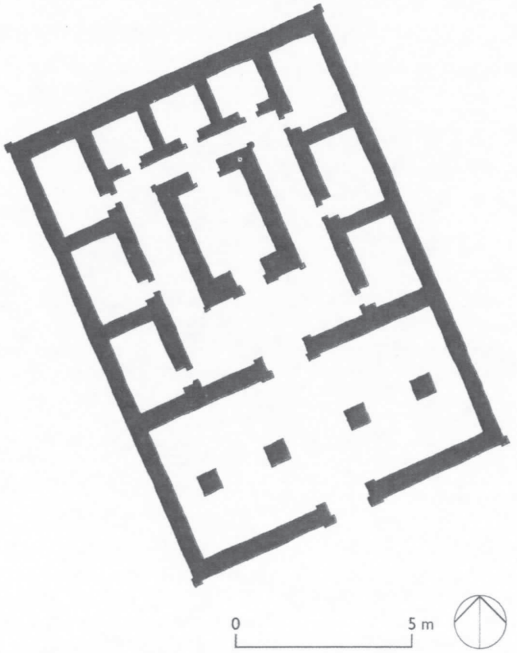


Figure 66. This plan of the Middle Kingdom temple at Tod shows the typical tripartite sacred area preceded by an antechamber, or pronaos. Drawing Nicholas Warner.

The architecture of these temples varies somewhat. The temples of the Fayyum and Thoth Hill perhaps demonstrate the 'norm' for the period. In this architectural version, the main temple building is either one large narrow room or a columned portico that constitutes the antechamber/portico leading to smaller rooms (seven at Qasr el-Sagha and three at both Thoth Hill and Medinet Maadi), with each one of these rooms being dedicated to a separate god. An enclosure wall delineates the sacred precincts, and a set of gates or pylons marks the temple's entrance.

The temple at Tod is a more complicated example and is a precursor of the architectural traditions of the New Kingdom. This temple has an open courtyard leading to a pillared antechamber that opens into a free-standing chamber flanked by three rooms, one on either side, and one at the back. The emphasis here is on symmetry and on situating the image of the god in a separate enclosed space. At Tod, as at most extant Middle Kingdom

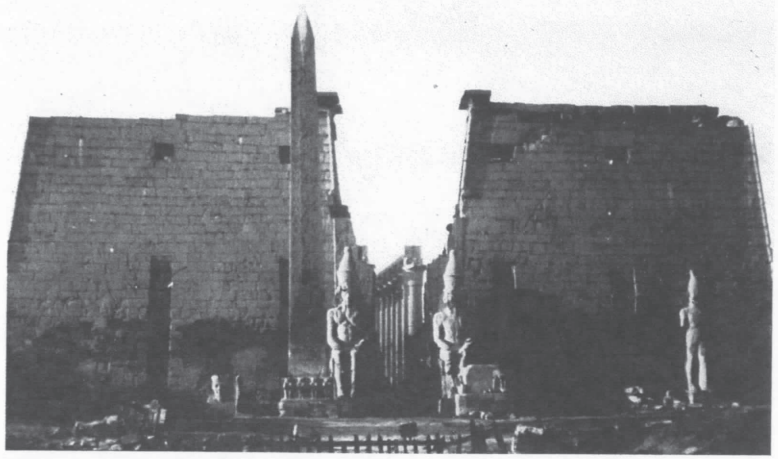


Figure 67. Luxor Temple's entrance is marked by its commanding pylons, which are fronted by seated statues of Ramesses II and by obelisks. Photo George Gaddis, private collection.

temples, the decorative programme is not complete, so one must look to New Kingdom temples for a sense of what might have been found on the walls of these earlier examples.

New Kingdom temples provide us with the most complete view of Egyptian temple architecture and the beliefs that formed it. The emphasis on symmetry and balance is seen in the typical ground plan, which incorporates a straight line of access from front to back. The land enclosed by the temple was thought to be a microcosm of the moment of the creation of the world, with the different architectural features reflecting elements of the mythic environment. The temple enclosure wall became an increasingly important feature, for it not only marked the limits of divine space, but it also, in its undulations, evoked the primeval ocean, Nun, from which all life sprang (see box on creation myths). Entrances through the enclosure wall were identified by large gateways called pylons. The form of the pylon resembled the hieroglyph for horizon, *akhet*, indicating where the sun rises and sets, and where each day begins and ends. The pylons were massive trapezoidal structures that contained stairs and a few internal chambers that also gave access to exterior spaces. Here heralds or priests could summon the townspeople and make announcements or lead prayers and rituals. When the king was present

he perhaps appeared before the people here. The outward-facing surfaces of the pylons incorporated slots that, according to ancient images of temples, held poles with pennants flying from them, evocative of the hieroglyph *netjer*, or 'god'. Obelisks fronted the pylons; these reified concrete images of the sun's rays and symbols of the power of the sun god, capped with gold or electrum, stood together with colossal statues of the king. Sometimes, a series of small sphinxes that acted as markers and guardians of the temple lined the central axis leading to the pylon. (Fig. 67.)

The internal spaces of the temple were arranged hierarchically, from larger areas to smaller ones, and moving from open, light spaces to darker ones. As one progressed through the temple to the most sacred space, the ground became higher and the ceiling level dropped, so that the naos, or holy of holies, was built at the highest point in the temple grounds, on the equivalent of the primeval mound of creation, and was also the smallest, darkest, and most secret of the chambers. (Fig. 68.)

The standard progression of spaces behind the pylon began with an open courtyard that could be used for sun worship. This space led to another courtyard that was surrounded by columns (a peristyle courtyard) giving way, in turn, to a hall with an equal number of pillars on either side of a broad central passage, similar to a nave. This was known as a hypostyle hall. Column capitals in this hall took the form of lotuses and papyri, the tutelary plants of Upper and Lower Egypt, arranged to the north and south of the axis. Their dense arrangement evoked the scenery of the marshes that emerged from the primeval ocean, Nun, and encircled the primeval hill, the hill of creation. The grandest of all hypostyle halls, in Karnak Temple, was constructed so that the columns flanking the central axis were higher than the others, thus giving a space for clerestory lighting. The remaining spaces were lit through holes in ceiling slabs that permitted shafts of light to illuminate the temple's dim interior. Sometimes Egyptian architects used light to help them 'activate' a temple. Shafts of light, dramatically visible in dim interiors, acted as light-columns, and windows were strategically placed so that the light that shone through them illuminated certain images and texts at specific times, thereby making those objects potent and effective. Small holes have been found at the edges of doorways, indicating that these areas were further illuminated by the addition of plates made of beaten gold or copper that reflected the light as people carrying lamps passed through the opening. (Fig. 69.)

After a temple's hypostyle hall one entered the surround for the holy of holies, the naos or sanctuary where the image of the god was kept on a

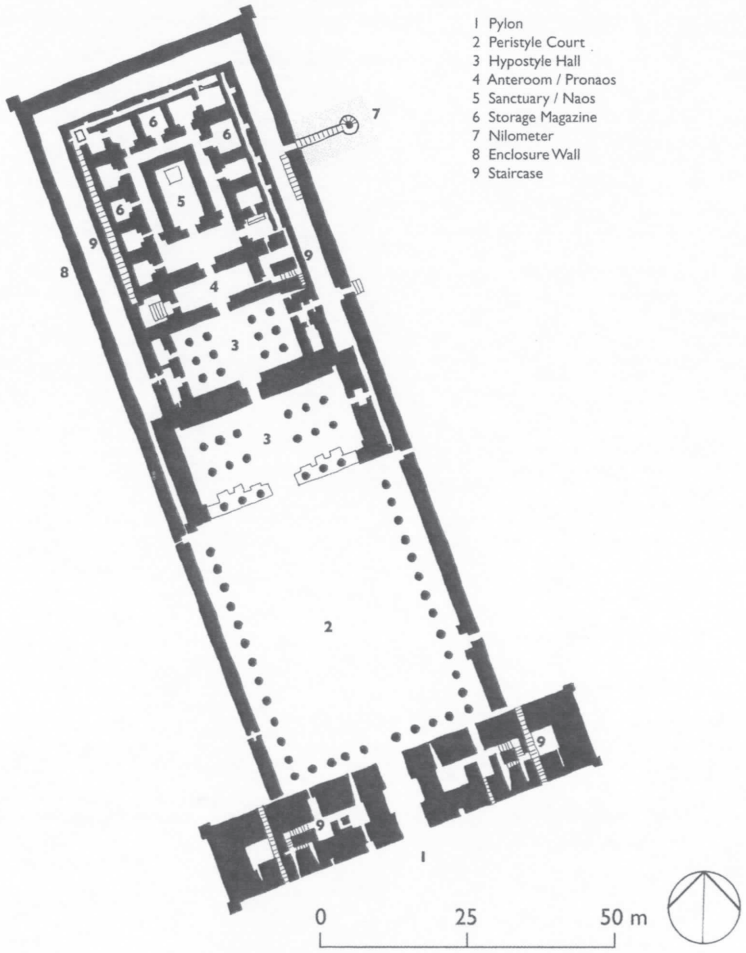


Figure 68. This plan of Edfu Temple (Ptolemaic period), dedicated to Horus, shows what an ideal temple might look like: entrance pylons, an open courtyard, a hypostyle hall, a pronaos or ante-room, the naos, places to store ritual equipment, areas for robing, ways to access the roof for special rituals, and a Nilometer – all enclosed by a wall. One feature not seen here is a sacred lake. Drawing Nicholas Warner.



Figure 69. The hypostyle hall at Karnak Temple, which Seti I started building and his son, Ramesses II, completed. This many-columned hall with clerestory lighting is a masterpiece of Egyptian architecture and central to Karnak Temple (19th Dynasty). Photo George Gaddis, private collection.

plinth, often fronted by an altar. This was the highest and darkest part of the building and represented the primeval hill where the first god lived. The god of the temple assumed the identity of the first god by being placed in the naos, generally a free-standing chamber set within the larger structure, with an ambulatory or walkway surrounding it. This ambulatory led to rooms at the sides and back of the naos that were used to store temple furniture and offerings, and sometimes for libraries. Some temples contained crypts beneath their floors for additional storage and to protect the most important and valuable temple furnishings; some of these spaces might also have served a ritual purpose. Additionally, some temples, particularly those dating to the Late and Graeco-Roman periods, had hollow spaces in their walls where priests could move unseen from room to room and perhaps even act as the god's voice delivering oracles. Often, stairways led from the precinct of the naos to the roof, where there might be more chapels, but which was also the site for rituals associated with the New Year, as well as for any other rites that involved the heavens. Beyond the naos, additional courtyards and rooms could be and often were constructed. Such chambers, however, were only of secondary importance.

Frequently the temple enclosure included a sacred lake within its boundaries that was a physical manifestation of Nun and consisted of a small stone-lined lake or pond that could be entered by steps. Its water could be used for ritual purification, and the god's barque, which held his wooden naos containing his statue, could be taken to sail upon it. Many temples also contained a Nilometer, which was connected to the river by steps or a tunnel. This device permitted the temple's priests to measure the rise in the Nile's level, and it was used mainly to monitor the river's height at inundation, so that the flood level could be predicted. The king and the temple used this information and its likely consequences for annual crop yields in estimating the taxes that they would levy (see Chapter 7).

In temples of the Graeco-Roman period, small buildings, called *mammisi* or birth-houses, started to be erected within the enclosure wall and near the entrance to the main temple. These small temples illustrated the divine birth of a god. They were often dedicated to the youthful form of Horus (Harpocrates, or Horus the Younger), and thus to the royal cult as a manifestation of Horus on earth. Presumably, these buildings were a focus for worship not only for the young god pictured on its walls but also for the cult of the king (Horus on earth), and possibly also for people concerned with their own fertility or that of the land and livestock.

Within a temple enclosure wall was not just the temple proper (and later the *mammisi*); it also encompassed all of the support services that allowed the temple to function effectively. These included houses for the temple's priests; a temple garden where medicinal and ritual plants and herbs, as well as basic food crops, could be grown; poultry yards; and pens for animals to be used sacrificially or to feed temple personnel. Workshops for temple butchers, bakers, brewers, vintners, carpenters, metalworkers, weavers, and potters were also integral elements of a temple enclosure but were located slightly apart from the temple proper. Secondary buildings such as the *per-ankh*, or 'House of Life', a scholarly institution where scientists studied and worked and that also served as a library and scriptorium; temple administration offices and archives; scribal and priestly schools; and healing institutions were also found on the temple grounds, as were vast granaries and storerooms that contained the temple's wealth. Thus, temple enclosures can be taken as a microcosm of the larger settlements found throughout the country. (Fig. 70.)

The Decoration of Cult Temples

The basic decorative scheme for cult temples was fairly straightforward. The chief function of temple decoration was to reproduce, in perpetuity, an ideal balanced relationship between the king and the gods that ensured the survival of *maat* and Egypt. Exterior walls were carved with images of the king's exploits, especially of his deeds associated with warfare. The pylons featured stock images of the king smiting the enemies of Egypt; it did not matter if a particular king had ever fought against any of these peoples, he just had to be represented doing so. (Fig. 71.) These images acted as an apotropaic device that protected the temple from evil and at the same time perpetuated the role of divine kingship as it related to the conquest of chaos, manifested by Egypt's enemies. In addition, temple doorways were marked with winged sun-disks, images of strength and protection. Interior walls tended to bear scenes of the king's making different offerings to the main gods of the temple, as well as to other appropriate divinities; these images illustrated another aspect of his royal role – as an intermediary with and a pacifier of the gods. In return, the gods were shown rewarding the king with a long and stable reign, indicating that they would ensure the well-being of Egypt and its inhabitants. (Fig. 72.) The majority of the texts carved on temple walls offered formulae and phrases of praise, and most ceilings were decorated with five-pointed stars, evoking the sky goddess, Nut, and placing the temple within a divine landscape.



Figure 70. Plan of Karnak Temple showing the Great Amun Temple and the other temples that formed part of this great religious complex. Drawing Nicholas Warner.

Additions to and variations in the basic schema of decoration existed, and made each temple unique. (Fig. 73.) In some instances, a particular religious tale was illustrated on the temple wall, together with its text. One example can be seen at Edfu Temple and features the myth 'The Contendings of Horus and Seth', in which the two gods battle for dominion over Egypt. At Luxor Temple, a frontal view of the temple itself is shown, as are the procession and rituals associated with that temple's major cultic event, the Opet Festival. Esna Temple is adorned with special cryptographic hymns to the god Khnum that are written almost entirely

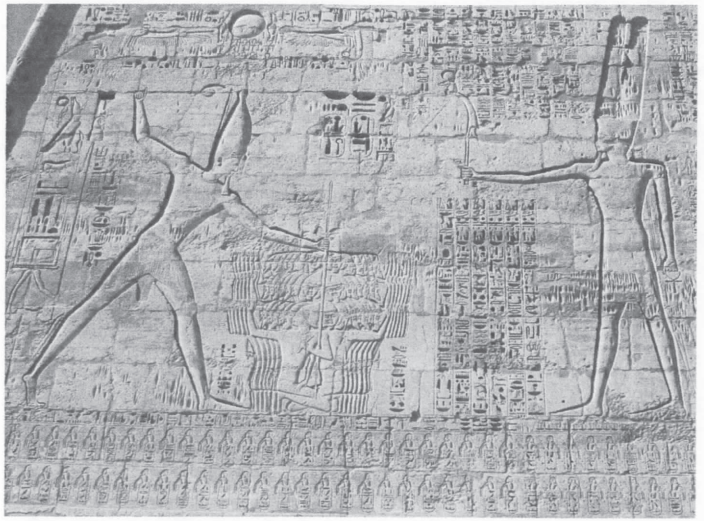


Figure 71. On this pylon at the temple at Medinet Habu, Ramesses III is smiting his enemies while Amun looks on and offers victory. This motif first appears in the Narmer Palette (Dynasty 0/1; Fig. 125) and becomes a standard iconographic symbol of the king's strength & protection of Egypt. Photo Salima Ikram.

using different hieroglyphs for 'ram', and Kom Ombo Temple shows a set of medical tools.

The Architecture of Funerary/Memorial Temples

Far more examples survive of funerary temples than of cult temples. Those from the Old and Middle Kingdom are associated with pyramids, and vary considerably in form prior to the 5th Dynasty. In the Archaic period funerary (also called mortuary) temples were actually separated from the burial place and were located near the cultivation. In the pyramids of the 3rd Dynasty they took a variety of forms and were often located on the pyramid's north side, aligned with the North Star; at the end of the dynasty, however, the focus shifted to the east and the sun. From the early 4th Dynasty onward, each king's pyramid had two temples attached to it: a Valley temple and a funerary/mortuary/memorial temple. Both were located on the east side of the pyramid so that they could face the rising sun, symbol of the promise of solar resurrection that emphasized

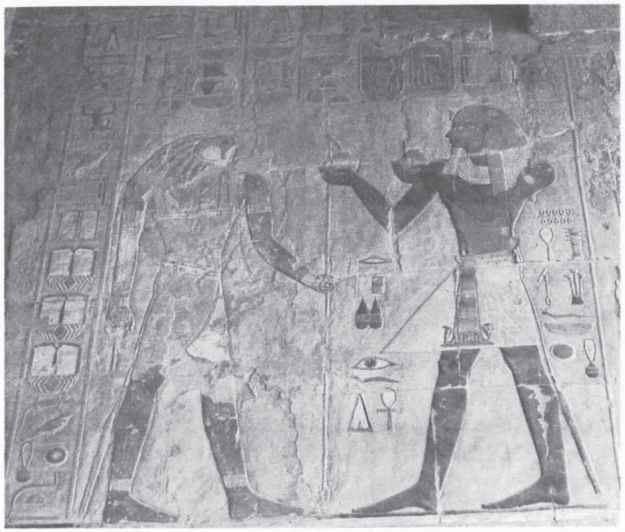


Figure 72. King Thutmose III offering nw *pots filled with wine to the god Horus who in turn promises many* heb-sed *festivals to the king at the 18th-Dynasty Anubis Chapel in the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari. Photo Salima Ikram.*

the king's identification with a sun god. The Valley temple was closer to the Nile Valley: it received the body of the deceased king, and its priests were probably involved in the king's mummification, as well as in funerary rituals. This building was connected via a causeway, a long covered corridor, to the funerary temple, and it acted almost as an antechamber to the main upper temple. The larger, Funerary, Temple, also called a Mortuary or Memorial temple, was constructed adjoining the east face of the pyramid. Until the 5th Dynasty there was little standardisation in temple plans, although often both Valley and Funerary temples shared certain elements, such as an open court for solar worship, chambers for images of the king and the gods, and storage rooms.

The 5th Dynasty saw a certain amount of standardisation in both types of temples. Valley temples featured quays to permit boats to dock and were fronted by columned porticoes that led to a T-shaped hall, often with a side room to the south. As before, a causeway connected the Valley temple to the Mortuary temple. The latter was accessed through a narrow entrance hall that led to an open, colonnaded court. This court opened into a transverse corridor that led to a series of smaller rooms, including small chambers that

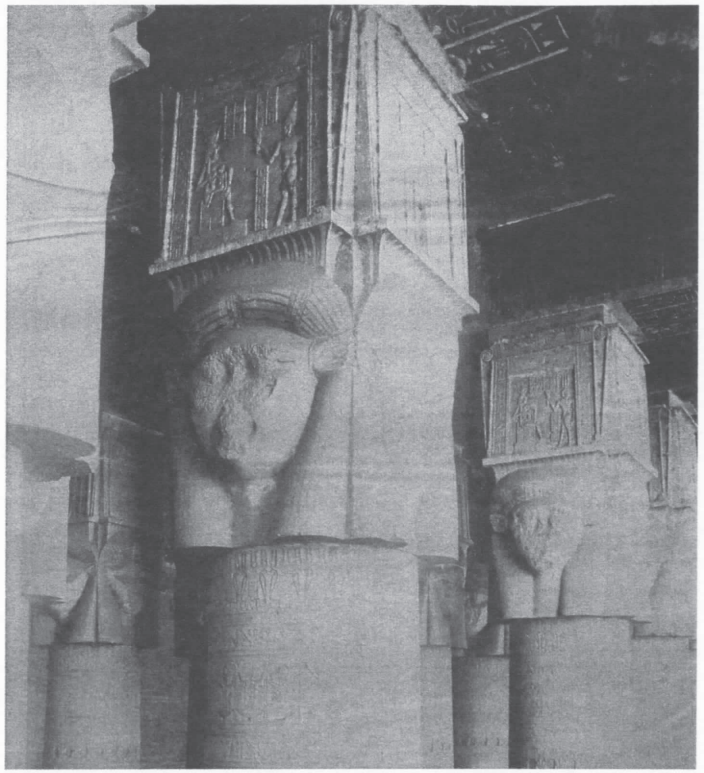


Figure 73. In some instances, special divinities have columns that evoke them, such as the Hathor-headed columns found in temples and shrines to Hathor, including this example at Dendera. Photo Antonio Beato, private collection.

were meant to display statues of the king and the gods, as well as an offering hall. Magazines (storage rooms) were located on the side of the building. This basic template persisted to the end of the Old Kingdom. (Fig. 74.)

The Middle Kingdom saw great variations in the design of temples attached to royal burials. (Fig. 75 a and b.) Temples ranged from simple building complexes, such as had been common previously, to elaborate maze-like constructions, such as that favoured by Amenemhat III that earned it the sobriquet 'The Labyrinth' in Late Antiquity. Some of these variants persisted into the early part of the New Kingdom, although they maintained the

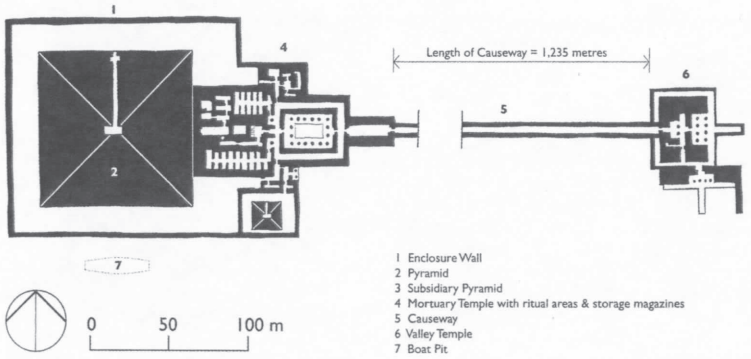
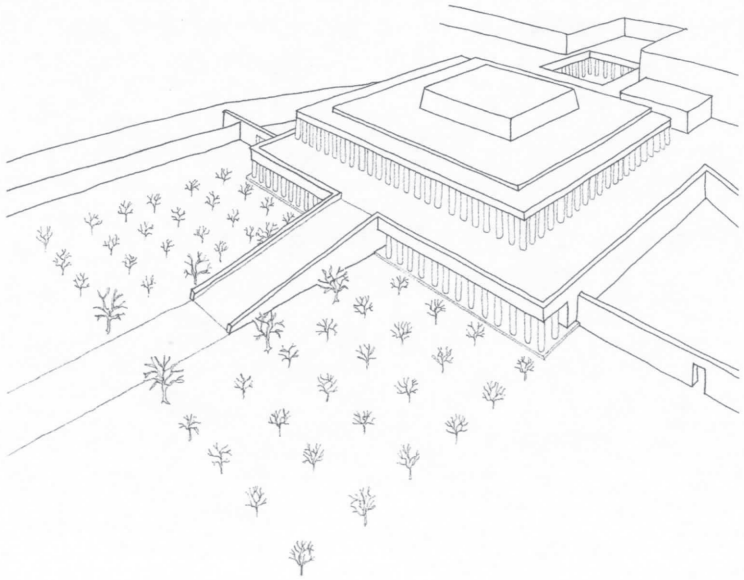


Figure 74. Pyramid complexes of the 5th Dynasty, such as this one belonging to Sahure, showed a degree of standardisation not seen in earlier times, although the main elements of a pyramid complex had been established by the 4th Dynasty. This complex does not actually have a boat pit (7), but these pits have been found with many other royal burials of the Old Kingdom. Some other complexes have additional satellite pyramids belonging to queens and princesses. Drawing Nicholas Warner.

essential elements established in the Old Kingdom. (Fig. 76.) By the middle of the 18th Dynasty, however, funerary temples had adopted the same basic plan as that for cult temples. (Fig. 77.)

The Decoration of Funerary/Memorial Temples

The earliest funerary temples until those of the 3rd Dynasty were built mainly of mud brick, and virtually nothing is known of their decoration. Those of the 4th Dynasty were fairly plain, their chief enhancement provided through the different colours of the stone used in their construction. The stones included



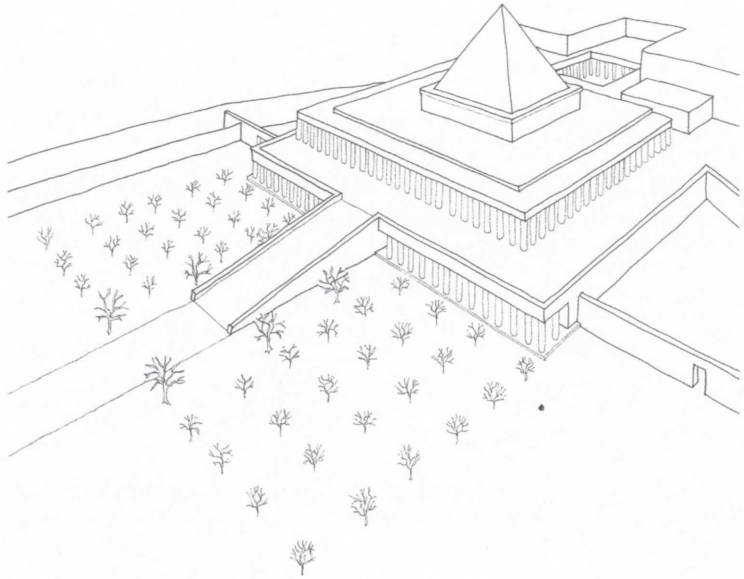


Figure 75. Mentuhotep II's mortuary complex at Deir el-Bahari was unusual in that it combined the funerary temple with the tomb. The building was nestled in the Theban hills, fronted by trees. A small subterranean chamber, reached by a passage (the Bab el-Hosan), was located at the front edge of the enclosure and perhaps acted as a cenotaph, as it contained an empty sarcophagus and a statue of the king. Archaeologists are not sure whether the main structure was crowned by a mastaba (top) or by a pyramid (bottom); both reconstructions are shown here. Drawings Nicholas Warner.

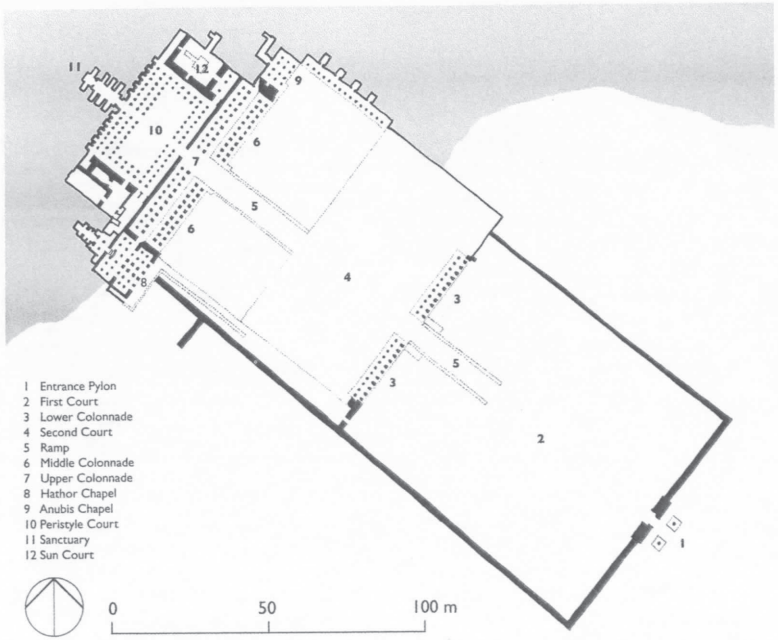


Figure 76. Hatshepsut's Mortuary, or Memorial, temple was designed and constructed by Senenmut, her master of works and a favoured courtier. Called Djeser-Djeseru *(Holy of Holies) in Egyptian, it is an unusual building consisting of open courtyards and ascending podia enhanced by colonnades and is set into the natural bay of the cliffs of western Thebes. It contains not only areas for the worship of Hatshepsut and members of the royal family but also sanctuaries dedicated to different gods, with the most important reserved for Amun, Re, Horus, and Anubis. Hatshepsut's kingly tomb, which is accessed from the Valley of the Kings, is almost beneath her temple at Deir el-Bahari. Drawing by Nicholas Warner.*

red granite, which symbolised solar energy and blood; white calcite, which indicated light and purity; and black basalt, which represented the black soil of Egypt. The king's name was inscribed in several places, particularly on the causeway. (Fig. 78.)

From the 5th Dynasty onward, this form of simple decoration, which was inherent in the materials used, changed, and Egyptians began to carve the interiors of Valley and mortuary temples with scenes associated with royal rebirth and the maintenance of *maat* and divine kingship. These images



Figure 77. The enclosure wall of the Temple of Millions of Years of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu encompasses not only the temple but also subsequent edifices, both sacred and secular. The temple is a Memorial temple, and although it contains Osirid columns most of its other architectural features are identical to those of cult temples. Photo Marjorie Fisher.

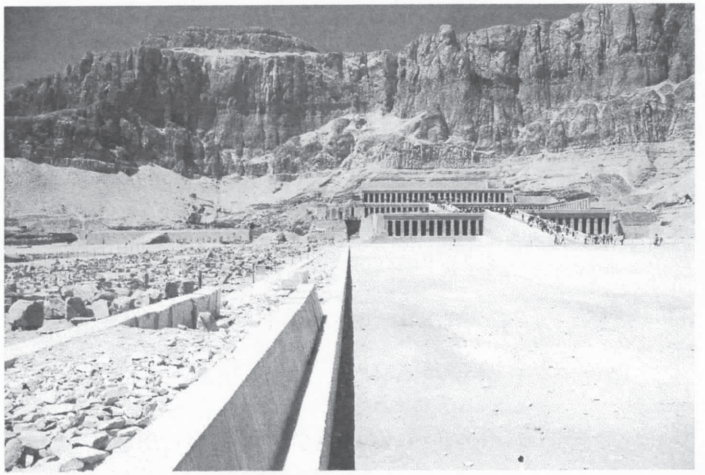


Figure 78. The design of Hatshepsut's Funerary temple (on the right) *was partially inspired by the earlier temple of Mentuhotep II* (left). *Hatshepsut's temple fits elegantly into the landscape. This spot was important as it was probably associated with a shrine of Hathor, a goddess of kingship, and was also roughly aligned with Karnak Temple to the east. Photo Aidan Dodson.*



Figure 79. When being invoked in a deceased or divine state, the king (Ramesses III at Karnak, in this instance) was often shown on pillars as Osiris. Photo Salima Ikram.

included the king's making offerings to different gods, being suckled by goddesses, maintaining *maat* in the guise of a sphinx trampling Egypt's enemies, hunting wild creatures that represented *isfet* (chaos), and slaying a white hippopotamus (also a symbol of chaos). The causeways were decorated with scenes showing phases in the construction of the royal tomb, as well as with scenes from the daily life of the ancient Egyptians. By the New Kingdom, these temples also included scenes depicting specific events from the king's rule, including expeditions to foreign countries, successful hunts, and victories in battle. (Fig. 79.)

Temple Rituals and Prayers

The temple was the centre for cultic activity in Egypt. Here the daily cult and special festivals associated with the temple's god were celebrated, helping to create *maat* on a daily basis and thus ensuring the country's continued safe existence. The recitation of prayers and enactment of appropriate rituals activated the cosmic power of the temple and its god, and preserved *maat* in this world and in that of the gods. Although we do not know all the details of the daily temple ritual, we do have some idea of what occurred based on certain papyrus documents and on the scenes and texts engraved on temple walls.

A temple's god was treated as a living being and had to be awakened, have incense burned before the statue to 'open' its nostrils, and be bathed, clothed, fed, and worshipped three times a day, at sunrise, noon, and sunset. Ideally, the king officiated on these occasions in every Egyptian temple. In practice this was not feasible, and high priests replaced the king in all temples, save for the one in which he was physically present.

While reciting appropriate prayers, the high priest would approach the naos and unseal the door. Incense would be burned because gods breathed only sacred, censed air. The priest would then open a smaller naos that held the god's image. This naos was also censed, prayers were recited, and hymns were sung. Then the statue would be purified with water and natron (a cleansing agent associated with purification and divinity), anointed with sweet-smelling oils and perfumes, and dressed in fine new linen. Throughout the process, the high priest and his attendants rendered suitable prayers, hymns, and ritual gestures. Once the god was dressed, offerings of foodstuffs such as wine, milk, beer, oil, meat, and bread would be made, as well as other offerings of garlands, bouquets, incense, and linen, and more prayers recited, before the priests returned the statue to the naos, which they resealed. Then the priests would exit the chamber, brushing away their footsteps and sealing the door behind them. In return, the god was expected to continue to bless Egypt and to help the pharaoh to control nature and to keep Egypt's enemies at bay.

Once the offerings had been consecrated to the deity and then magically accepted or consumed by the god, they were removed and probably reverted to the priests. Presumably, the priests lived off these offerings once they had been consecrated to the god. Any surfeit from sacrifices was sold off, as is attested to by documents, such as Papyrus Bulaq 18, which includes, amongst other items, details about the sale of an excess of sacrificial beef by a temple. One type of offering, however, that was consumed exclusively by the deity was a burnt offering. Burnt offerings were foodstuffs that were doused in oil and set aflame so that their smoke could rise up to sustain the god.

Accessing the Gods and Their Temples

Unlike certain modern religious traditions, ancient Egyptian temples were not congregational in nature except perhaps during festivals and then only in certain localities. Temples were not accessible to everyone. Direct contact with a god's image was limited to the king, the high priest, and a handful



Figure 80. Priests carrying the sacred barque of Amun at Karnak Temple. The barque is decorated with ram-heads, and the naos is covered, rendering the god invisible. Photo Salima Ikram.

of other high-ranking, initiated prelates. Most priests, and most private individuals, had no direct dealings with the figure of the god. In fact, access to different parts of the temple depended on a person's rank, education, and level of initiation within the priesthood. The area within the larger enclosure walls, just outside the pylon, and the first courtyard were accessible to most people, particularly when the festivals of the god were being celebrated. The remaining areas of the temple were restricted to initiates.

When the god's image appeared in public (within a small shrine covered with a shroud and situated on a model boat or sacred barque) for festivals and in processions, it could be approached by the populace, who could then directly address the god. (Fig. 80.) Processional routes were punctuated by barque shrines where the god's boat could pause and be seen, and perhaps the god could give oracular advice (see Fig. 44). Otherwise, people could come to the temple's outermost courtyard and direct their prayers to an engraved image of the god there, or could address their concerns to images of the king as god. Sometimes special chapels for people in need of spiritual succour, such as the 'Chapels of the Hearing Ear', were erected in an accessible area. These were situated at the back of temples, behind the sanctuary and in the outer wall, and thus were open to the populace. These chapels were particularly popular as healing centres. Other healing centres, featuring ritual bathing or dream therapy, were also constructed within the temple enceinte or enclosure, particularly during the Late period and thereafter. However, the majority of Egyptians carried out their daily worship either at home or in small shrines rather than in the state-built temples.

Festivals

Festivals played an extremely important role in the life of the temple. The major festivals for any temple were associated with its chief divinity. Thus, the creation or the birth of the god and the major events in his or her career were the main focus of celebrations and were unique to each temple. Other festivals were more general, occurring simultaneously in temples all over Egypt and unifying the country on a grand scale. These would occur in conjunction with cyclical events, such as the rising of the star Sothis that signalled the advent of the New Year, or the different stages of the Nile flood. Smaller celebrations would mark the phases of the moon and other notable astronomical and natural phenomena. Significant events such as royal coronations, the *heb-sed* race that celebrated the 30th anniversary of a king's reign, or the birth of a royal child would also precipitate festivities in temples throughout the land.

Some areas of Egypt had special festivals associated with them, such as the Theban Festival of the Valley. In this celebration the statue of Amun-Re of Karnak sailed across the Nile to the west, visiting the memorial temples of the kings as well as barque shrines that had been erected in major cemeteries. This ritual served to unite the dead with the living and was a kind of large-scale family reunion for divinities, royalty, the elite, and commoners.

In addition to featuring special rituals with accompanying music and dances and the recitation of specific hymns and prayers, festivals were also large-scale celebrations that offered the entire population, not just the priests, a spiritual encounter. The god would appear in a procession and be available to the populace for consultation and praise. Food would be distributed to the people from the offerings and sacrifices made to the god. Outside the temple, pilgrims from surrounding areas would gather and perhaps stay for several days. Festivals also attracted itinerant merchants and travelling entertainers, much as religious festivals do today.

Priests

Until the New Kingdom there was no completely separate priestly class in ancient Egypt; almost anyone could become a priest of some sort. Often, individuals who were priests also had other duties within the state or temple administration, and one person could hold several priestly titles. Both men and women served the gods, although it was more common to have groups

of priestesses in the temples of goddesses, particularly in the Old Kingdom. Thereafter, it seems that men came to dominate the priesthood, although priestesses still existed in less significant positions. Priests were known as servants of the god, or *hemw-netjer*, and were supervised by an overseer called the *imi-ra hemw-netjer*. The chief priest of every temple was in theory the king, but in actuality the king delegated his role to the high priest of a specific temple. Each high priest had a special title depending on which temple he served. For example, the High Priest of Ptah at Memphis was known as *wr kherep hemout*, or Great Director of Artisans, and the High Priest of Re at Heliopolis was known as *wr maa iunu*, or The Greatest of Seers in Iunu (Heliopolis).

A special type of priestess was known as the God's Wife; she might be classed as the female equivalent of the high priest, although her duties were different. Furthermore, in the 18th Dynasty her role was solely religious; however, in the 25th Dynasty the God's Wife had political as well as religious authority.

Many other priests serving in a temple had specialized jobs: the main duty of the *khery-heb*, or lector priest, was to recite the prayers that accompanied specific rites; the *sem*-priest officiated at funerals and was responsible for many of the objects, such as cloth, oils, and perfumes, that were used in the daily liturgy; and special priestly prophets, scribes, butchers, and land stewards could also be found. Temple musicians, singers, and dancers, of both sexes, also held significant positions in the various temples, as they all had vital roles to play in temple rituals and during festivals.

Many Egyptians served in the lowest rank of priest, a *waab* (pure one), for three months of a year on a rota system. This allowed a large percentage of the Egyptian population to have some sort of contact with the gods, and to be a part of the Egyptian religious establishment, as well as to enjoy the material benefits of payment in kind for such work. Priests were paid through the temple's offerings: the goods were consecrated to the gods and then were divided amongst the priesthood and temple staff according to their rank. Excess could be sold or gifted. Sadly, there is evidence of corruption amongst priestly staffs: a 20th Dynasty text relates how some priests sold sacred animals for personal benefit, and another, dating to the 26th Dynasty, describes how a struggle for priestly income led to murder.

Cult and mortuary temple priesthoods might have had slightly different organizational structures, particularly in the Old Kingdom. Funerary priests were divided into groups, or *phyles*, that rotated in their service to the deceased, whereas priests who served the cult of a god tended to hold, save

for the *waab* priests, permanent positions. Sacerdotal positions were often hereditary, and a title could remain in a family for several generations.

Priests (and priestesses) were presumably trained within the temple during their youth, particularly if they were holding an inherited post. For the most part, they were literate, and the higher-ranking ones tended to be nobles rather than commoners. When serving in the temple, they had to maintain certain levels of purity, which included washing regularly, shaving their bodily hair, chewing natron and spices to keep their breath fresh, and keeping their nails trimmed, as well as abstaining from certain foods at specific times.

Private Religion and Personal Piety

Priests officiated at all the daily rituals in major temples, occasionally with members of the elite participating. During festivals, the common people were also included in rituals and prayers, especially when the god went in procession. Otherwise ordinary Egyptians had to content themselves with passing their prayers to the gods via the priests or with addressing their prayers to the external temple images of divinities. Within the temples, priests could convey prayers and offerings to the gods into the sacred areas, and offerings in the form of votive statues and stelae of all shapes and sizes crowded the courtyards, halls, and chambers of the temple. In fact, these areas could become so crowded that they had to be periodically cleared to make way for new votive offerings: all the old statues and stelae were tossed into a large pit within the temple precinct so that they could still carry out their job of sending prayers to the god. Examples of these statue-filled pits have been found by archaeologists and are called 'caches' or 'cachettes', places filled with hidden items. Because temples as they appear today are largely bereft of their statuary and votive offerings, these finds have been especially useful in allowing us to visualise the temple interiors as spaces that were once densely packed with such dedications.

Gods also provided oracular advice to the Egyptian people, often through the medium of the priests. If familial or legal issues could not be resolved by civic means, the god would be approached on a specific day devoted to oracular activity, and the divinity would be asked to decide the issue. An individual could address questions phrased in a certain way, and the sacred barque containing the divine image might move to indicate a 'yes' or 'no' answer. If the deity in question was manifested as an animal, either sounds or movements

would indicate the god's decision. Doubtless some corrupt priests benefited from this practice, as they were the ones who interpreted the god's response.

In general, though, commoners (as well as nobles) worshipped the gods in domestic shrines; in small chapels, including wayside shrines; or in special temples that might answer their specific needs of the moment, such as the Chapels of the Hearing Ear described earlier. Depending on what was desired, one would visit the appropriate deity in such a venue. Thus, students who wished to succeed in their examinations would pray to Thoth, while people whose love lives needed help would pray to Hathor or Bastet. At harvest time farmers would offer to Renenutet, the goddess of harvests and plenty, and people about to embark on journeys would invoke Anubis.

In wealthier homes, domestic shrines were set up in the garden or within the house; possibly such estates contained more than one shrine. In homes owned by less wealthy families, shrines were set up within the house. A house shrine consisted of the image (or images) of a god (or gods), often set within a niche, and a place for offerings before it. The size of such a shrine varied depending on the size of the house and on the level of piety of the homeowner, and probably also the degree to which the homeowner wished to display his piety. These shrines were the site of daily devotions that might occur as often as three times a day, as in the temples, as well as whenever the residents wished for spiritual succour. Examples of such shrines have been excavated at the sites of Deir el-Medina, Abydos South, and Tell el-Amarna. The main function of these house shrines was to protect the family by providing them with a place to venerate the gods, who, in return, would watch over the family both in this world and in the divine and eternal sphere. (Fig. 81.)

The gods who graced domestic shrines were rarely the gods of the state religion; instead, they tended to be gods with whom the person establishing the shrine felt a rapport or who was a patron for that person's particular metier. Thus, scribes would revere images of Thoth, while musicians, singers, and dancers would favour Hathor and Bastet. Magicians might erect a shrine to Isis or Heka (another deity concerned with magic), while craftsmen would worship Ptah, and embalmers Anubis. In addition to the main gods, minor protective divinities such as Bes and Taweret were a part of every household. Bes was depicted as a leonine dwarf, brandishing knives or percussion instruments, while Taweret's image showed the deity with the head and body of a hippopotamus that had pendulous breasts and a pregnant belly, a lioness's paws for hands and feet, and, often, was wearing a woman's tripartite wig



Figure 81. Statuettes and stelae depicting favoured gods were the focus of household shrines. Favourite domestic deities were the goddess Tawesret and the dwarf god Bes. Tawesret, shown as a hippopotamus with some leonine features, often had her mouth parted threateningly to scare away demons. Now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, these figurines of Tawesret, who protected homes, women, and children in particular, might have been kept in house shrines. Photo Salima Ikram.

that extended into a crocodile tail down the back. Bes and Taweret were frequently painted on the walls of rooms where people slept or where childbirth took place. Their fearsome aspects were thought to scare away demons and evil spirits and to protect the home's inhabitants. Their images were also carved on beds in order to safeguard a body when it is at its most vulnerable and to protect the sleeper's dream life (as well as his or her physical body) from attack by demons. These two divinities, sometimes paired as husband and wife, also appeared in temples, particularly in the *mammisi*, and images of them were often worn as amulets.

Local gods were extremely popular, as they were seen as successful intercessors between local people and the major gods. Sometimes the Egyptians just referred to a deity as the 'city god', using the word that denotes city without providing a specific name. In other instances, a local god might be likened to a modern saint: a native of the area who had lived an extraordinary life and upon death had been elevated to a semi-divine state. Such individuals included the famous Imhotep, the architect of King Djoser's Step Pyramid and a renowned physician; Hekaib, a governor of Elephantine Island; and Amenhotep, son of Hapu, who was architect to King Amenhotep III. Such gods were generally worshipped only locally, save for Imhotep, whose cult spread throughout Egypt during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. There are several other less famous examples of this type of cult (see Chapter 4).

Certain kings and queens who had been venerated as full gods during their lifetimes, and even more so after their deaths, also acted as patrons for specific localities. The most notable of such patrons was manifest in the joint cult of Amenhotep I and his mother, Ahmose-Nefertari, that was particularly popular amongst the workmen of Deir el-Medina, as well as throughout Thebes. Images of the king and his mother abounded in tombs of the New Kingdom, and stelae dedicated to the royal pair have been found in temples throughout the area.

Ultimately, Egyptians used a variety of means to connect with the gods, whether for spiritual strength or to achieve certain goals. Commoners, like royalty, would make offerings and praise the gods in order to attain their ambitions. Individuals would dedicate special offerings of food and drink or votive statues (of stone, faience, or hand-crafted out of mud), bits of linen, jewellery, stelae, and vessels, or they would offer up special prayers so that the gods would be appeased and would answer their wishes.

Funerary Beliefs

The Egyptians believed that after they died, if they had lived in accordance with *maat*, they had the potential to be resurrected and to live eternally, with both their bodies and their souls participating in the process. Thus, mummification was important because it preserved the body and was a vehicle for the soul (see Chapter 9). According to Egyptian belief, once they died and were mummified, their souls underwent a series of tests before different gods and, if they passed, finally came before the god Osiris, who was enthroned in the Hall of Judgement. If he judged them to have lived a just life, they would

Atenism

During the reign of King Amenhotep IV, the cult of the sun god Aten rose to supremacy. This god, whose name is known to have occurred as far back as the Old Kingdom, was given prominence from the reign of Thutmose IV, Amenhotep IV's grandfather, onward. This focus on Aten was at least in part a political ploy; the king intended the cult of Aten to balance the influential priests and cult of the state god, Amun. The Amun priests had become so wealthy and powerful that they were challenging royal authority. Aten is a version of the sun god shown as a sun-disk whose rays end in hands. The god indicated his approbation and blessing of the royal family by holding *ankh* (life) signs in his hands to their noses, imparting eternal life. Whether out of religious conviction or political manoeuvring, Akhenaten replaced Amun with Aten as the principal state deity and disbanded the priesthood of Amun. Any images or mention of Amun (including pictures of ducks and rams, animals associated with Amun) were eradicated during this process, and Amenhotep IV changed his name to Akhenaten ('Soul/Manifestation of the Aten'), very obviously shifting his allegiance to the new god whose priests would support him.

During the Amarna period, the Aten reigned supreme, although other deities were still worshipped, albeit with much less devotion. Household divinities, such as Bes and Tawesret in particular, remained popular, and amulets of these gods have been found at Amarna. Akhenaten abandoned Thebes, the city of Amun, as a capital, and moved his court to Akhetaten ('the Horizon of the Aten'), a new city, situated in Middle Egypt, that he dedicated to his favourite god. However, after Akehnaten's death, his successor Tutankhamun restored the old order and Amun reigned supreme in Egypt once again.

pass into the Afterlife (also known as the 'Fields of Iaru', or *Imenti*, 'the West'), where they would enjoy an eternal existence.

This belief in rebirth and resurrection was tied closely to the solar cycle in which the sun sets (dies) in the evening and is reborn the next day, as well as tied to the rise and fall of the Nile. Natural cycles were critical for the ancient Egyptians, not just in their funerary beliefs but also in their daily lives, where cultic ritual ensured continuation of the cycles that made all life possible.

The concept of the soul in ancient Egypt is complex, and tripartite, consisting of the *ka*, the *ba*, and the *akh*. The *ka* was shown as a pair of upraised arms and was one's double, created at the same time as the body and identical to it in every way. Once a person died, the *ka* continued to require nourishment; it could move around the tomb, benefiting from the offerings left there. The *ba* was depicted as a human-headed bird and was the part of the soul that could take flight and be separated from the body. After one's death, this aspect of



Figure 82. The ba *of the deceased hovers beside the corpse in this picture from a funerary papyrus in Berlin. Photo Nicholas Warner.*

the soul could range where it pleased, both in this world and the next. The *akh* might be likened to the 'divine spark', and its role in the afterlife of non-royal people is obscure. For kings, the *akh* joined with the gods and the eternal stars, keeping watch over Egypt throughout eternity. (Fig. 82.)

The Egyptians' belief in resurrection was inspired by the myth of Osiris (see the next section), who was the quintessential god of renewal and rebirth. Quite possibly the Osiris myth reflected actual events in the distant historical past, events that had happened so long ago that they had become clouded by myth over time. Typically, Osiris was shown as a man wrapped in white mummy bandages, his arms crossed over his chest, and his hands clasping the royal crook and a flail. He wore the *atef* crown made up of the White Crown flanked by two plumes (a reference to *maat*, which was often denoted by a feather); sometimes Osiris's crown also had two curling horns emerging on either side of it, perhaps alluding to the god Khnum and to his role as the creator of the physical body and the *ka*. Osiris's flesh was shown as either black or green. The black referred to the fertile silt from the Nile's inundations and identified Osiris with the essence of the land of Egypt. The green symbolised the plants that were nurtured by the soil and presented Egypt at its most fecund and rich. Both colours were associated with the potential



Figure 83. Osiris was generally shown as a mummified figure with either green or black flesh, symbolising resurrection and rebirth, and a crook and a flail, expressing his dominion in the Afterworld. Photo Salima Ikram.

of the earth to bring forth life. The crook and the flail that Osiris carried were also allusions to the fertility and safety of the country's herds and crops. (Fig. 83.)

Osiris was mentioned as early as the Old Kingdom, but there were no complete written records of his myth until the Greek period, when the most coherent account was recorded by the Greek historian Plutarch. It is probable that the myth had evolved and changed over time, and that this Greek account was a modified version of the Egyptian original.

The Myth of Osiris

The story of Osiris, as derived from the Egyptian and Greek sources, has several variations, but can be summarized as follows. In the Golden Age,

the gods ruled the world. Osiris ruled Egypt, with Isis, Great of Magic, his consort and sister, ruling beside him. As ruler, Osiris was associated with the physical land of Egypt. Thus the fertility and productivity of the land and its livestock were identified with, and derived from, the regenerative power of the king. This force was manifested in the *heb-sed* race and festival associated with divine kingship and the well-being of the country (see Chapter 6).

Osiris was an ideal ruler, good and just, beloved by all save for his brother Seth, who was jealous of Osiris's position. Seth plotted to overthrow his brother and rule in his place, so he conceived a wicked plan to murder Osiris. He had a richly decorated chest made to measurements that fit only his brother's body. Seth then hosted a magnificent feast to which he invited his seventy-two cohorts, as well as Osiris. At the end of the banquet, when everyone had indulged sufficiently, Seth presented the chest and offered it to anyone who could fit into it. Much as in the story of Cinderella, everyone tried to fit into the richly ornamented casket, but with no success. Finally, Osiris was persuaded to try it, and naturally he fit perfectly. Seth slammed down the lid and locked and sealed the casket. He then hurled this earliest of coffins, containing Osiris, into the Nile, where the king drowned.

The river took the casket to the Mediterranean Sea and thence on to Byblos (in modern Lebanon). There it lodged in a tree that was turned into a column in the local ruler's palace. Perhaps this is the inspiration for one of Osiris's symbols, the *djed* (eternal) pillar. Isis, mourning her husband's loss, went in search of him and eventually tracked his casket to Byblos, and brought it back to Egypt. In some versions, Seth, who had established himself in the interim as the ruler of Egypt, retrieved the casket. Opening the box, he removed Osiris's body and cut it into pieces that he scattered throughout Egypt. The number of pieces into which Seth divided Osiris's body was variously reported as from fourteen to forty-two (the latter figure being the traditional number of *nomes*, or provinces, of Egypt).[2]

Isis and her sister, Nephthys, who was Seth's consort, searched for Osiris's body parts. Isis gathered these together and reassembled her husband's corpse. But one crucial portion of his body was irretrievably lost: Osiris's phallus had been eaten by a fish. The fish that ate Osiris's member has been variously identified as the *Lepidotus*, the *Phagrus*, and the *Oxyrynchus* (genus *Mormyrus*), all of which were taboo foods in certain areas and at certain times. Isis manufactured a false phallus and attached it to her husband's reassembled body, successfully bringing about Osiris's resurrection. Then Isis turned herself into a black kite (the bird *Milvus migrans*) and mated with her husband.

(Isis and Nephthys are commonly depicted as black kites in funerary contexts, acting as mourners and protectors of the dead. Perhaps the mournful cries of these birds recalled for the ancient Egyptians the wails of mourning women, hence the birds' identification with these goddesses.) After coupling with Osiris, Isis and Nepthys embalmed the body of Osiris, with the help of Anubis and Thoth.

Isis became pregnant as a result of her union with the resurrected Osiris, and she retired to the town of Khemmis, in the Delta, where she gave birth to her son, Horus. Horus grew to manhood here, nursed by his mother and by the goddess Hathor. When he came of age he emerged from the Delta and engaged in a series of dramatic battles with his uncle, Seth, in an effort to avenge his father and gain the throne of Egypt. This particular myth cycle is recounted in 'The Contendings of Horus and Seth', which, according to some sources, took place over an eighty-year period and was related to the Egyptian idea of divine kingship, which linked the ruler of Egypt to Horus. During their struggles, Horus and Seth battled each other in various guises, played tricks on each other, and were aided by different deities of the pantheon.

Horus was the victor in these contests against Seth, and was ultimately crowned king of the black land of Egypt. Thus this god is identified with the living pharaoh who becomes the manifestation of Horus on earth. Osiris became king of the dead and of the Underworld; as the prototype mummy, Osiris also was linked to deceased kings. Seth was given dominion over the red lands of the deserts, as well as over thunderstorms, both elements that were unpredictable and threatening, and that needed to be controlled. Thus, Seth was associated with the forces of chaos and disorder, while Horus and Osiris were associated with the maintenance of harmony and *maat* in the Nile Valley and in the hereafter.

Osiris ruled the Afterworld and judged the souls of the dead to determine who could be awarded eternal life. The deceased was conducted to the Judgement Hall of Osiris by Anubis, and his or her heart was weighed against the feather of *maat*. If the individual had lived a true and just life, the heart and the feather would balance and the person would be rewarded with eternal life in the realm of Osiris, a more perfect version of Egypt. If not, the deceased would be devoured by the monster Ammit and vanish forever. Egyptians also associated Osiris with Re, who vanquished evil and who entered the Underworld after the sun had set and rose again the following day.

Although Osiris was worshipped at many sites, his chief cult centre, and the focus of Egyptian funerary beliefs, rituals, and pilgrimages, was Abydos, where Isis allegedly buried his head. The route to the Otherworld was also thought to originate at a break in the cliffs here. By the Middle Kingdom, the Egyptians had identified the tomb of a 1st Dynasty ruler, King Djer, as that of Osiris, and the site became a major centre of pilgrimage. It was also at this time that it became common for any dead person to be given the epithet 'Osiris (Name of deceased)'. Previously, this term was reserved for royalty. Many Egyptians chose to be buried at Abydos, while others erected memorial stelae in a large area adjacent to the Osiris Temple at the site instead. This 'Pilgrimage to Abydos' was a key part of funerary belief and was featured in tombs in two-dimensional representations on the walls, as well as in three-dimensional wooden boat models that showed the bier being taken to Abydos, thereby further ensuring that the deceased would be reborn.

Funerary Texts

Egyptians believed that the journey to the Afterlife, an idealised Egypt where everything was perfect, could be eased by the use of funerary texts. These books were essentially guidebooks or crib-notes for protecting, provisioning, guiding, and helping the deceased to enter the Afterlife safely. They supplied spells that negated the threats and overcame the obstacles that riddled the way to the Afterlife.

The earliest funerary texts are called Pyramid Texts, as they were found inscribed inside pyramids. (Fig. 84.) They were exclusively for the use of royalty and were first inscribed in the subterranean burial chamber of the Saqqara pyramid of Unas (c. 2350 BC), the last king of the 5th Dynasty. They comprised some eight hundred spells or 'utterances'. The texts were carved in vertical columns in sunken relief. The spells were meant to aid the king in his ascent to the sky and ease his reception into the kingdom of the gods. Although the Pyramid Texts were a perquisite of royalty in the Old Kingdom, they were usurped extensively in their original format by non-royals in the Late Period, as well as by a few officials of the Middle and New Kingdoms, who used only a selection of these texts on their sarcophagi.

What are now called Coffin Texts were a development of the Pyramid Texts and were painted inside coffins of the First Intermediate period and the Middle Kingdom. They offered the guarantee of an Afterlife associated with Osiris for *everyone*, or at least, for everyone who could afford the necessary

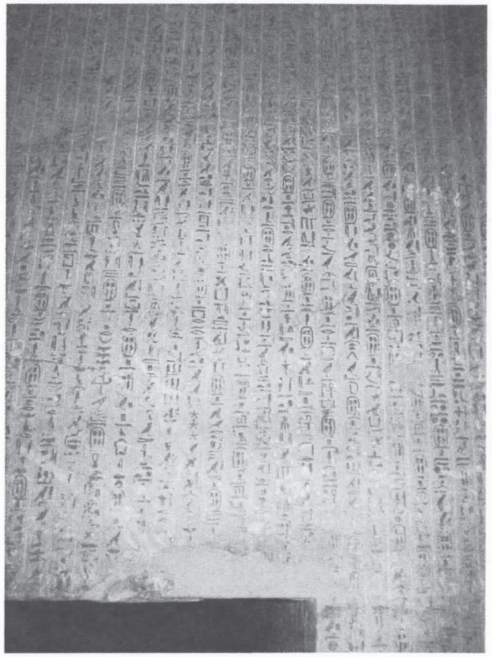


Figure 84. The Pyramid Texts in the burial chamber of Pepy I at Saqqara provided the king with a way to become one with the eternal stars. Photo Salima Ikram.

accoutrements for an Afterlife. The Coffin Texts contained at least 1,185 spells, often enlivened with vignettes. These spells were maps and guides to the hereafter. However, Coffin Texts were not restricted to coffins; they have been found on mummy masks, tomb walls, and sometimes even on papyri. Some of these inscriptions were identical to those in the Pyramid Texts, and their purpose was the same: to see the deceased safely through the tests and obstacles that marked the path to the Afterlife.

Perhaps the most famous of all Egyptian funerary books is the so-called Book of the Dead, which first appeared in the early 17th Dynasty and continued to be popular through the Late Period. Known more correctly as 'Coming Forth by Day', the book had about two hundred spells or chapters and was lavishly illustrated with obscure vignettes. Many were derived from the Pyramid and Coffin Texts, with new additions. Spells from this book



Figure 85. Funerary books were commonly interred with the deceased. This scene, from a papyrus in Berlin, shows Chapter or Spell 1 of the Book of the Dead. This text was the most popular funerary book and was used for several centuries. It consisted of several chapters, or spells, some of which were accompanied by vignettes. Photo Nicholas Warner.

were inscribed (generally in hieratic [see Chapter 8]) on papyri, mummy cloths, amulets, figurines, coffins, and even tomb walls. (Fig. 85.)

Several other funerary texts that date from the New Kingdom onward, termed the Books of the Underworld, also exist, primarily in a royal context. These include the Book of the Amduat (the Book of What Is in the Underworld), and the Book of Gates (named for the large gates that guard each hour). These two texts were organized according to the twelve hours of the night, with the ram-headed nocturnal form of the sun god located at the centre of each hour. The sun god illuminated each nocturnal hour, bringing life to the world and resurrecting the dead to be judged. These texts were distributed spatially in the tomb so that they started in the west and ended in the east, thus imitating the path of the sun god's barque on its route to rebirth. Later books, such as the Book of Caverns, replaced the division of the night into twelve hours with a division into six sectors. However, all of these books shared the idea that the deceased was to be identified with the sun god and, like him, must be safely steered through the perils of the night hours to ensure his safe rebirth, and that of the

cosmos, on the following day. Ultimately, many of these royal texts were used by the elite in the hope that they too could support the sun god in his nightly journey and be reborn the next day. But regardless of the precise nature of any of these funerary texts, the desired result was the same: rebirth, resurrection, and eternal life.