The Complete
Temples of Ancient Egypt

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With 535 illustrations, 173 in color

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Old and Middle Kingdom Development

Pyramid temples, sun temples and provincial temples of the Old Kingdom

In its developed form the Old Kingdom pyramid complex contained, in addition to possible various minor chapels, two structures which are referred to as temples. A valley temple - which provided an entrance to the complex from the Nile or its canal - was connected by a long, walled causeway to the second structure, a mortuary temple, where sacrifices and other rituals were conducted for the deceased king.

In the earlier pyramids the mortuary temple usually stood on the north or south side of the pyramid in a north–south oriented enclosure. Later pyramid enclosures, from the 4th dynasty, positioned the mortuary temple at the base of the eastern face of the pyramid superstructure and were oriented on an east–west axis - the orientation of most later temples of all types.

By the time of Khafre/Chephren (2520–2494 BC) the plan of the royal mortuary temple was established, with certain fixed areas: an entrance hall was followed by a broad columned court, which gave access to the rear section of the temple containing an enclosed area with five shrines or niches for statues of the king, as well as storage chambers, and an inner sanctuary. Essentially, most of these elements are also found in later temple design. While many of the details are clearly different, a very real transition may be seen in the Old Kingdom mortuary temple from the simple plans of the Predynastic and Early Dynastic shrines to the more complex Middle and New Kingdom forms of the developed Egyptian temple.

An important variant of the pyramid temple is found in the sun temples constructed by a number of kings of the 5th dynasty at various sites in the general area of the Memphite necropolis. Specifically intended to establish an eternal cult of the king 'in the domain of Re' they were additional to the pyramid cult complex.

Six of these structures were built, though only that of Niuserre (2416–2388 BC) at Abu Gharub survives to any recognizable extent. In fact, four of the sun temples known to have been built have not been located; but it is likely that all these temples shared a fairly common plan and function. Judging by the temple of Niuserre, the sun temples of the 5th dynasty were similar to the standard pyramid complex in having a valley temple with a causeway leading up to the main enclosure with its focal structure - in this case, an obeliskoid monument rather than a pyramid - and ancillary buildings.
The 'mortuary temple' of the Old Kingdom pyramid complex was built at the base of the pyramid and served for the cult of the dead king. It was in these temples that the cosmic and afterlife symbolism of Old Kingdom temple complexes developed.

Like the pyramid complexes of the period, the sun temple of Niuserre was oriented on an east–west axis, and again like the standard pyramid complex it contained a brick model of the sun barque positioned just to the side of the complex. Given that the underlying symbolism of the pyramid is also largely solar-related, the connection between pyramid and sun temple complexes seems clear.

The contrast between the Old Kingdom royal mortuary temples and sun temples on the one hand, and provincial cult temples of the same period on the other could hardly be greater. Often distant from the major settlement centres and ultimately on the fringes of royal concern, provincial cult temples developed without the constraints of the royal architectural tradition. And although these structures may have displayed ancient and distinctive
characteristics, ultimately they represent dead ends in the long-term development of the temple. The irregularly shaped Archaic and Old Kingdom temple at Medamud, a little to the north of Thebes, provides an excellent example. Although we do not know what deity was worshipped at the site in Old Kingdom times (later it was the falcon-headed god Montu), the unusual twin mounds of this temple are doubtless rooted in ancient mythic traditions similar to those which inspired the mounds of Hierakopolis and other early Egyptian sites.

Separate from the provincial temples, yet in some ways falling alongside them, the cult temple built for the fa or 'life force' of the 6th-dynasty king Pepi I (2289–2255 BC) at Bubastis (Tell Basta) in the eastern Delta and the special chambers built in the temple area at Hierakopolis – in one of which was found the famous life-sized copper statue of this king along with a statue of his son (or possibly also of Pepi) – are hard to classify. Not physically connected with the pyramids of this king, the ka temple at Bubastis and the chapel – if that is what it was – at Hierakopolis may represent smaller royally commissioned provincial religious structures of which we still have little knowledge.

**Middle Kingdom developments**

Although the Middle Kingdom witnessed the widespread building of religious structures – including many more royally commissioned provincial temples than in early times – a great many of these structures were later demolished or substantially rebuilt when they were incorporated into more elaborate structures erected on the same sites (p. 51). The extant evidence for Middle Kingdom temples is thus paradoxically scarcer than for some other periods in which fewer temples were constructed.

One of the earliest examples of Middle Kingdom temple architecture and one of the few not substantially destroyed in later rebuilding is the combined mortuary complex of Nebhepetre Mentuhotep at Deir el-Bahri. This innovative structure, which included a sanctuary for the king and was the burial site of the king and his queen, is an example of the new religious architecture of the Middle Kingdom.

The sanctuary is now all that remains of the extensive mortuary temple which stood on the foundations of the mortuary temple of Mentuhotep II. It is a simple rectangular structure which incorporates the entrance to the tomb and contains a number of shrines and chapels. The sanctuary is entered through a small temple gatehouse at Ezbeq Raset which leads to a pillared hall. This is the only example of an Egyptian temple with a pillared hall, and we see an
The ricky decorated 'White Chapel' of Senwosret I at Karnak shows the expanded use of inscriptions and representational art which developed in Middle Kingdom temples. The detail above Senwosret before Amen.

Plan of Senwosret I's symmetrically designed temple of Montu at Tod.

mortuary temple and tomb of Nebhepetre Mentuhotep (2061–2010 BC) at Deir el-Bahri in Thebes. This innovative, terraced building with its colonnades and central monumental superstructure (the exact form of which is not known) was set at the back of the natural 'bay' in the Theban mountains and was the inspiration for several later mortuary temples of the same type — including the famous and much better preserved temple of Hatshepsut in the same location.

Senwosret (Sesostris) I (1971–1926 BC), the second king of the 12th dynasty, was the first monarch of the Middle Kingdom to institute an extensive building programme, constructing a number of temples from the Delta to at least as far as Elephantine in the south. At Thebes, he constructed a monolithic shrine and massive limestone shrine walls, as well as the beautifully decorated 'White Chapel' which provides a fine example of the expanded use of hieroglyphic inscription and representational art in Middle Kingdom temples.

The solitary obelisk bearing Senwosret's name is now all that remains of what may have been an extensive temple complex at Helopolis, but the foundations of a number of smaller temples of this king and his successors remain to show a temple style which incorporated a pillared court before a sanctuary with separate — frequently tripartite — shrines at the temple's rear. Sometimes, as in the small temple of Amenemhet I and Senwosret III at Ezbet Rushdi, near Qantir in the eastern Delta, the pillared hall is fronted by an open courtyard so that we see an incipient grouping of the three elements of court, pillared hall and sanctuary which form the basis of later New Kingdom temple design.

While there were many archaizing tendencies in the architecture of this period, developments in certain aspects of temple design and structure can be seen throughout the Middle Kingdom. For instance, building in stone became increasingly common. While some temples contained only a few elements (such as doorways and pillars) of stone, the temple of Amenemhet III and Amenemhet IV at Medinet Madi in the Fayum, although only a little more than 8 by 11 m (26 x 36 ft) in size, consisted of a sanctuary with multiple chambers and a small pillared court, all of which were constructed of stone.

Architectural symmetry also increased in the Middle Kingdom, and the temple of Montu built by Senwosret I at Tod provides one of the clearest examples of the developed Middle Kingdom temple, with its precisely symmetrical design and the incorporation of various cult chambers adjacent to the main sanctuary. And as well as being beautifully decorated, Senwosret's 'White Chapel' on the processional route from the Great Temple of Amun at Karnak provides an example of an equally symmetrical and exquisitely fashioned barque chapel or way-station of this same period.
New Kingdom Temples

The expansion of Egypt's political and economic power during its New Kingdom age of empire led to both the building of numerous new temples and the expansion of many which already existed. Individual kings strove to outdo their predecessors, not only in the construction of their own mortuary temples but also in the further development of major cult centres and in the building of temples dedicated to established deities as well as those that had not previously enjoyed formal cults.

Temple construction in the New Kingdom reached its high points under Amenophis III in the 18th dynasty and Ramesses II in the 19th, and did not really decline until several hundred years later. In terms of development also the Egyptian temple may be said to have reached its apogee in this period. Costly and magnificent religious structures were produced on a regular basis, and many if not most temples were constructed almost entirely of stone. The so-called 'standard' temple plan was established, in which an entrance pylon gave access to an open court followed by a columned hall and finally the sanctuary itself. Although it might be varied, and was certainly elaborated in many cases, this standard form persisted almost all the way through the Graeco-Roman period, and is the plan of most of the Egyptian temples that have survived relatively intact till modern times.

The standard plan was used, in fact, not only for the divine cult temples but also for the mortuary temples of the rulers of the New Kingdom. The kings of this period abandoned the pyramid complex of earlier ages and - doubtless for the purposes of security - constructed their tombs in the Valley of the Kings. The Tombs of the Theban monarchs were to be mortuary temples. These were the focal points for the ruler and as a result the New Kingdom period already utilised a

A number of a

ional division between 'divine' and 'mortuary' temples. The function of the Egyptian temple was intertwined with the ruler, and the temple would be a projection of the ruler and his powers which were the most suggestive of immortality and divinity. The 'divine' temple was not necessarily separate from the 'mortal' temple, the temple of the king himself. The kings also formed a distinction between the 'divine' temple and 'mortuary' temples. New Kingdom temples were often established for the particular deity, and may still be inscribed.

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Valley of the Kings, in the hidden reaches of the Theban mountains well away from their mortuary temples. This move eliminated the pyramid itself — the focal point of the earlier funerary complexes — and as a result the royal mortuary temples of the New Kingdom were free to follow the standard plan already utilized for the divine temples.

A number of scholars now feel that the traditional division of temples into the categories of ‘mortuary’ and ‘divine’ is a false one, arguing that the functions and symbolic characteristics of all Egyptian temples were both too varied and too intertwined to support this distinction. Certainly, it would be a mistake to ignore the common elements which underlie the wide variety of temple structures which existed in Egypt; and hu or ‘mansion’ was the common term used by the Egyptians for all types of temple. Also, because it was believed that the Egyptian king became a god in the afterlife, any distinctions between divine and mortuary spheres necessarily blur in both theory and practice. ‘Divine’ temples often had mortuary significance and ‘mortuary’ temples often had divine associations. Nevertheless, the distinction is perhaps too established to shake off easily and in some ways it may still be a useful one.

The Egyptians themselves followed it to the extent that divine cult temples were usually referred to as ‘mansions of the gods’ and mortuary temples as ‘mansions of millions of years’ — an allusion perhaps to the desired continued cult of the deceased king. In practical reality, one of the greatest differences between the divine and mortuary temples was simply one of tenure. Although in theory they were established as temples of millions of years, many of the mortuary temples of the New Kingdom did not, in fact, fare well in that regard: a number were deserted and used as quarries for stone even before the New Kingdom was over. The cults of the gods tended to enjoy more continuity, but they too were not immune to turmoil and, sometimes, disaster.

During the Amarna Period the heretic king Akhenaten (1353–1333 BC) not only severely curbed the power of the burgeoning cult of Amun but also promulgated a system of worship in which the Aten solar disc was intended to supersede all other deities. Not even the gods were safe from the agents of this king, and while the temple closures and suppressions of other deities may have been short lived, the scars of desecration are still visible in most of the major temples which have survived from the New Kingdom. In the years after Akhenaten’s death thousands of names and images of Amun and other deities had to be recut into the temple walls from which they had been expunged, and thousands more remain in only hacked and chiselled outline.

If the Amarna Period can only be seen as a decisive downturn for the fortunes of most of Egypt’s cults, the following Ramesside era was characterized by recovery and unprecedented growth. Ramesses II (1290–1224 BC) is credited with building more temples than any other monarch in Egyptian history. Although none of his successors completed anything like the number of his monuments, temples continued to be built throughout the later New Kingdom. Perhaps more importantly for the cults themselves, the power and relative autonomy of the major temples — especially that of Amun at Karnak — recovered and grew steadily.
Temples

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A Glorious Decline

The Third Intermediate and Late Periods
The shift of power from Thebes to the Delta region that took place during the 19th and 20th dynasties left the Theban high priests of Amon essentially in control of Upper Egypt. There was certainly interaction between the two areas: the Theban priests acknowledged the northern kings and married into their families; the royal ‘Libyan’ line in the north was evidently related to Libyan elements at Thebes; and a number of northern kings left evidence of their activities in the Theban area. Nevertheless, for much of the Third Intermediate Period, Upper and Lower Egypt existed as functionally independent regions.

The most important temple remains of the period 1070–712 BC are thus those of the Delta cities of Tanis, Mendes, Sais and Bubastis. This trend continued into the succeeding Late Period (712–332 BC); the temple enclosure of Sais in the 26th dynasty, for example, was well over 450,000 sq. m (4,845,000 sq. ft) in area and its buildings, according to Herodotus,
were as splendid as any in Egypt. A number of the kings of this period constructed their tombs within the precincts of these temples and doubtless embellished them considerably.

During much of the Late Period, however, Egypt was ruled successively by a number of outside powers. Beginning with the 25th dynasty, Nubian or ‘Kushite’ kings controlled most of the country - and constructed many fine monuments. This period of rule by Egypt's southern neighbour was cut short by Assyrian invasion, followed eventually by the forces of Achaemenid Persia, which threatened or controlled Egypt to some extent for the best part of 200 years. Some of the earlier Achaemenid emperors adopted the pharaonic style of rule and built or elaborated upon a number of Egyptian temples. Darius I, for example, built the impressive temple of Hibis in the Kharga Oasis and repaired others, from Busiris in the Delta to el-Kab in southern Upper Egypt. Persian rule was never popular, however, and revolts and other problems also led to the Persian destruction of a number of Egyptian temples during this period.

Unfortunately, comparatively little evidence survives of the temples built during the Third Intermediate and Late Periods, and in many cases less is known of them than the structures built before and after this epoch. It seems clear, however, that it was towards the end of the Late Period, in the 30th dynasty, that the architectural style usually considered typical of the Graeco-Roman era in fact developed.

After Alexander: the Ptolemaic Period
When Alexander the Great entered Egypt in 332 BC he was hailed as a saviour from the hated Persians. On his orders, repairs were carried out to temples damaged in the Persian devastation of 343, and his legacy to Egypt was to prove both extensive and lasting. After Alexander's death and the dissolution of his empire, rule of Egypt fell to Ptolemy I, one of Alexander's generals; and with Ptolemy began the dynasty of naturalized foreigners which would rule for almost 300 years.

The pious construction of temples to Egyptian divinities was an obvious method for these foreign kings to legitimate their rule, and one which they exercised to the full. Following the architectural styles of the temples only recently established in the preceding period, the Ptolemaic rulers constructed temples throughout Egypt. Many of these are today among the best preserved of all Egypt's religious structures.

The relative smoothness of the transition from the Late Period temples to those of the Graeco-Roman era may be clearly seen in the ruined temple of Belbeyt el-Hagar in the Delta (p. 104). Dedicated to Isis, and functioning as a northern centre for her worship, the temple was begun in the latter part of the 30th dynasty but completed by Ptolemy II and Ptolemy III in a manner which shows a clear continuity of decoration and design. As the kings who preceded them had done, the Ptolemies built on a large scale, using great quantities of granite and other hard stones which were often decorated with reliefs of particularly fine quality. The representations and inscriptions utilized in the decorative programmes of these Ptolemaic temples became increasingly obscure, however, as the details of the ancient religion became the special domain of a diminishing priestly elite. Eventually, obscurity became a goal in itself, and the inwardly focused and exclusive nature of the later Ptolemaic and Roman period temples would have much to do with the ultimate demise of Egyptian religion.

Pharaohs from afar: the Roman Period
The latter part of the Ptolemaic dynasty was plagued by internal power struggles, and as the contesting factions turned to Rome for assistance Egypt fell increasingly under the influence of the emerging Mediterranean power. Finally, the victory of Octavian (later Augustus) over his rival Mark Antony and Cleopatra VII spelled the end of Egyptian independence, and Egypt was declared a Roman province under imperial control.

Like the Ptolemaic kings, the Romans who followed them desired to adopt Egyptian models both for the purposes of their own legitimation and acceptance with the Egyptian priesthoods and people, and perhaps more importantly to preserve the social and economic stability within the area which provided much of Rome's grain supply. Roman emperors were thus depicted in pharaonic guise and continued to restore and in some cases elaborate Egypt's temples. One of the
The Romans displayed great interest in Egyptian civilization, and several emperors commanded the removal of sculptures and monuments from Egypt's temples (though these were perhaps already abandoned structures, such as at Heliopolis) which were to be set up in Rome. An example is the obelisk which today stands in the Piazza San Giovanni in Laterano and which was taken to Rome in the 4th century AD by Constantius II.

In AD 383, all but the Temple of Osiris at Philae were closed by a decree of Theodosius. A large number of figures were cut from the walls of the temple and reassembled in those of Theotokos, which survived in AD 435, saving them for Christianity.

(Above) In the late 3rd century, the Temple of Luxor at Thebes was used as a garrison and administrative centre by the Romans and was adapted to serve the cult of emperor worship.

Overall, the continued decline in the importance of Egypt's temples is evident, however, and by the early 4th century AD we find no less a structure than Luxor Temple incorporated into a permanent Roman military camp and adapted to serve the cult of emperor worship. Arguably, as Stephen Quirke has suggested, this could be seen as a Roman interpretation of Amenophis III's concept of Luxor Temple as a statement of the divine nature of kingship - now in the form of the emperor. But in any event, the fate of Egypt's temples was finally sealed by the acceptance of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire.
The coming of Christianity and Islam

In AD 383 pagan temples throughout the empire were destroyed by order of the emperor Theodosius. A number of further decrees and edicts, culminating in those of Theodosius in AD 391 and Valentinian III in AD 435, sanctioned the persecution of pagans and destruction of their religious structures, and soon Egypt’s temples were shunned and empty. The ancient shrines were quarried for stone, or in some cases overgrown by surrounding areas of housing or even purged of much of their decoration and utilized as chapels and basilicas of the new faith (p. 194). For the most part, however, the early Christians rejected the pagan buildings and many were destroyed by austere figures such as Shenute, a 5th-century monk whose fortress-like monastery in Middle Egypt was built from the stone of nearby temples.

Eventually Christianity itself was challenged by Islam. In AD 639 an Arab army crossed Sinai and entered Egypt, wresting the country from Byzantine control. For a time the caliphs, Muhammad’s successors as rulers of Islam, were content to run Egypt through a Coptic administration, but eventually the majority of Egyptians converted to the new religion. Sometimes existing temple structures were used as the setting for festivals in the new era or were adapted, as at Luxor Temple, where a mosque was built atop the earlier Christian and pagan structures (p. 167). But, by and large, the processes of dissolution continued.

The few temples which were abandoned and which were distant from major population centres fared best and remain today as the most perfectly preserved examples of Egypt’s ancient religious structures. Eventually, Egypt’s temples and other monuments of her pharaonic past became as mysterious to the Egyptians themselves as they were to the outside world. Whether covered by drifting sands or standing in full view, Egypt’s temples were lost and would have to wait to be rediscovered.