The Complete
Temples of Ancient Egypt

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With 535 illustrations, 173 in color
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Other Temple Structures

Egyptian temples were seldom constructed as structures in isolation. Usually the core temple building was surrounded by a number of subsidiary structures which shared the sacred compound. Some of these ancillary structures - such as mammisis (see below) and sacred lakes - were directly related to the religious functioning of the cult, while others - such as storage magazines and administrative offices - were part of the support mechanisms of the divine estate. Nevertheless, there is evidence that even some of these latter structures were regarded as having religious associations which transcended their apparently mundane roles.

Sacred lakes

Most temples had a sacred lake within their compounds and many have been carefully excavated, showing that, at least from New Kingdom times, they were usually rectangular with straight or slightly incurved sides. Cut so as to access the level of the underlying ground water, the lakes were lined with stone and had a flight of steps leading down from the side of the lake adjacent to the temple proper. These steps were necessary in order to reach the level of the water which varied according to the time of year. Even where their outlines are clearly visible, the sacred lakes of most temples have become filled over time and cannot now be examined, but that at Karnak has been completely cleaned and reflooded to give a sense of the original appearance of this feature.

Normally termed shu-netjer, 'divine lake', but also given specific names, the purpose of the sacred lake was both functional and symbolic. Functionally, the lake provided a reservoir for the water used in offerings and rituals of purification, and it was there that the priests bathed at dawn before entering the temple to begin their service.

Symbolically the sacred lake played an important role in representing various aspects of the Egyptians' cosmogenic myths of origin. Because creation was believed to have occurred when the sun god emerged from the primordial waters at the beginning of time, the sacred lake represented in a tangible manner the same underlying forces of life and creation; and in this way creation was symbolically renewed each morning as the sun rose above the sacred waters. The sacred lake at Karnak also had a specific feature which allowed geese held in connected pens to emerge through a narrow tunnel on to the surface of the lake - symbolizing the role of the goose as a manifestation of Amun in original creation. Certain mystery rituals, such as those of the resurrection of Osiris at Sais, were also performed on the shores of the temple's sacred lake.

Nilometer

Well-like gauge on the river bank probably from relatively early times were considered ones at Thebes, Medamud and Tod, while some measuring stones at Aswan belong to the island of Elephantine.

Karnak, Abydos, Ur, Tanis, Amarna, Sais, Nekhen, Dendera, Armant, Medinet el-Faiyum, Medinet el-Kab, Naqa, Medinet el-Bahri, Medinet el-Bast, Kod, Mons Claudianus, Elephantine.
Sizes of Sacred Lakes of Selected Temples

[all measurements are approximate]

Karnak, Anun temple 120 × 77 m/395 × 253 ft
Tanis, Anun/Khonsu temple 60 × 50 m/197 × 164 ft
Sais, Neith temple 35 × 34 m/115 × 112 ft
Dendera, Hathor temple 33 × 25 m/109 × 86 ft
Armant, birth house 30 × 25 m/98 × 86 ft
el-Kah, Nechbet temple 30 × 20 m/99 × 66 ft
Medinet Habu, Small Temple 20 × 18 m/66 × 59 ft
Karnak, Montu temple 18 × 16 m/59 × 53 ft
Medamud, Montu temple 17 × 15 m/56 × 49 ft
Tod, Montu temple 16 × 11.5 m/53 × 38 ft
Elephantine, Khnum temple 11 × 8 m/36 × 26 ft

Nilometers

Well-like gauges designed to measure the height of the river and to predict the annual flooding were probably constructed at points along the Nile from relatively early times. Important early nilometers were constructed at Aswan and Memphis and later ones at the second and fourth cataracts in Nubia. Nilometers can vary considerably in size and style. While some consisted of little more than a few measuring steps at the water’s edge, the Nile gauge of Aswan belonging anciently to the temple of Satis consisted of 90 steps descending down the side of the island to the Nile.

Nilometers might be open or might have steps flanked by walls, sometimes covered with a roof.

The structures labelled nilometers on temple plans in some guidebooks are in fact ancient wells, and true nilometers can usually be recognized by their location relative to that of the course of the Nile in antiquity. Many later temples had their own nilometers even when they were in close proximity to those of other temples. On the island of Philae there are two such structures within a few hundred metres, one descending down the side of the cliff from the colonnade near the temple of Nectanebo I on the southwest corner of the island, the other further to the north near the Ptolemaic mammisi.

Mammisis

A mammisi or ‘birth house’ (a term coined by Champollion from Coptic Egyptian) is a special, independent structure located within the temple precincts in which the mysteries associated with the birth of a god’s offspring (such as the child-god Harpocrates or Horus the Younger) were celebrated. Symbolically, these structures may be seen to be related to the birth rooms which were dedicated to the divine conception and birth of kings in some New Kingdom temples (p. 170). Though the focus on the birth of a god is clearly primary in mammisis, the divine relationship of the king to the gods is also frequently stressed.

Mammisis were present in all the major Graeco-Roman temples. Perhaps the best known and most complete is that of the Temple of Hathor at Dendera, which was dedicated to Iby (the son of Hathor and Horus) by the Roman emperor Augustus and decorated during the reign of Trajan. A small temple in its own right, this mammisi provides graphic explanation in its decoration and texts of the purpose of these structures. There are also the remains of an earlier birth house at Dendera begun by Nectanebo I of the 30th dynasty. Other major birth houses may be found at Philae (celebrating the birth of Horus), Kom Ombo (Panetbawwy), Edfu (Harsomptus) and Arment (Harpire).

The architectural style of the Ptolemaic and later mammisis is usually distinctive. An entrance or vestibule area opens into a somewhat shortened building, often within a surrounding peristyle with screen-like walls between the columns. Today, the forward areas of the birth house at Edfu are best preserved, while the rear section of that of Dendera is most complete. Both, however, provide a fine example of this type of building.

The inner walls of these structures are usually decorated with representations connected to their special purpose and are often inscribed with extensive hymns to the main members of the triad and the child deity. At Dendera, the whole range of events from the courtship of the parent deities through the birth and presentation of their child is depicted, including a particularly famous scene showing the formation of the child Iby on the
potter's wheel. In the birth houses at Edfu, Dendera and other sites a number of other deities were associated with the triads to whom the buildings were dedicated. Selected deities are frequently shown praising the young god, and apotropaic figures of the god Bes were often carved in relief on the abaci of the columns. In several birth houses the particular characteristics of Hathor are celebrated as goddess of music and intoxication in addition to her role as great mother goddess.

The house of life
The institution associated with the temples called per ankh or 'house of life' by the Egyptians seems to have fulfilled many functions. The exact relationship between the per ankh and the temple is not always clear, however, and it may be that some houses of life developed more of an independent identity than others.

Perhaps primarily the per ankh functioned as a scripatorium where the religious and mythological texts of the cult were written, copied, collated, edited and stored. These texts included not only the Egyptians' mythical and theological treatises and related documents, but also texts of recitations used in the performance of temple rituals and the master copies of new inscriptions which were to be carved on the temple walls or on obelisks or other features. Perhaps it was here, from the New Kingdom on, that the copies of the Book of the Dead often used in the Egyptian funerary assemblage were produced – sometimes for specific individuals and sometimes as templates later to be personalized by the inclusion of individuals' names.

Many of the texts preserved and copied in the house of life were considered sacred, as they dealt with divinely revealed matters – called by the Egyptians the ba re meaning the 'soul' or 'emanation' of Re. These sacred books were believed to be divinely inspired in virtually the same manner as the scriptures of the great monotheistic faiths of today. But there is some evidence to suggest that the house of life may have been divided into two areas, or in some cases abutted against a separate building where temple accounts, contracts, correspondence and other temple records were kept.

The house of life seems to have been much more than just a scripatorium and archive, however; it also appears to have functioned as a centre of priestly learning in many fields. While not necessarily a school as we might think of a modern educational institution, the subjects of writing, art, theology, ritual, magic, astronomy and medicine, among others, were certainly studied there. The large collections of books kept in the houses of life were famous throughout much of the ancient world, and in the 2nd century AD the medical writer Galen wrote that Greek physicians visited the library of the per ankh of Memphis to learn from its texts. Such libraries of the great temples were almost certainly the model upon which the famed Musaeum or Library of Alexandria was based, and the very idea of the university as it was later developed by Moslem and European societies, with its concentration of scholars and learned religious men, was to some extent the product of the ancient Egyptian tradition of the per ankh.

A final aspect of the per ankh is its role in relation to the court and to international diplomacy. Although the royal court employed numbers of scribes and scholars, it was unquestionably the per ankh that was regarded as the centre of learning in every sphere. It is no small boast that Ramesses IV made, therefore, in one of his inscriptions in the Wadi Hammamat, that he had studied all the texts of the per ankh in order to discover the secrets of the gods. Neither was this a purely religious statement, for it implies great learning in all aspects of knowledge. The priest Pa-ti-Ist who was selected to accompany Psammetichus (Psamtek) II in his expedition to Syria is said to have been told 'Look, you are a scribe of the House of Life, there is nothing on which you could be questioned to which you would not find an answer!'

Sanatoria
A number of the great temples probably had sanatoria within their compounds where the sick could be brought – primarily to seek healing from the gods but also, perhaps, to seek the wisdom of the priests and learned men of the temples. The remains of sanatoria in areas not originally built as such are, in fact, suspected in several temples – including the temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri (p. 175) – but the only clear remains of a sanatorium built for this purpose survive at the Graeco-Roman Period temple at Dendera (p. 149).

Hathor was revered as a goddess of compassion, and her temple at Dendera developed a reputation for healing which meant that people perhaps travelled considerable distances to seek her help. Her sanatorium consisted of numerous chambers where the sick rested, awaiting the dreams that brought divine prescriptions for their recovery, and a central cell containing statues in which healing powers were held in water which was drunk.
Kitchens, workshops and studios
The larger houses of the gods also often contained their own industries within the temple's perimeter walls. These supplied the practical needs of the cult and might include bakeries and breweries to produce the bread and beer which were among the staples of the Egyptian diet - and which were also offered in large quantities to the gods - as well as slaughtering rooms, butchers' work areas, kitchens and various workshops which produced goods such as the fine linen garments worn by the priests.

There were also workshops and studios to provide and repair objects such as cult images and items of temple furniture used in the service of the cult, as well as areas for the preparation of food offerings, floral arrangements and other gifts for the gods.

Magazines, stores and granaries
Storage areas were also needed to hold supplies of items produced by the temple workforce as well as gifts, payments and offerings brought in from outside. Such magazines and granaries, which we might regard as purely mundane storage areas, were in the Egyptian mind integrated to some extent into the sacred realm of the divine estate. Granaries, for example, were often the sites of specific religious rituals. New Kingdom tomb scenes show offerings being made to the gods in these areas, and a relief on the granary of Amun at Karnak shows Happy presenting offerings to the grain and harvest goddess Renenutet.

Likewise, a storehouse next to the magazines at the end of the portico along the façade of the Ramesseum on the Theban west bank and a similar dais in the court giving access to the magazines of Sethos I's mortuary temple at Abydos seem to include features with specific cultic functions tied to these areas. While our knowledge of the precise situation is imperfect, it is clear that even the areas of storage found within temple compounds could be regarded as participating in the same religious sphere as the other temple features in the divine estate.

Beyond the temple walls
Beyond the sacred area which held the temple proper each house of the god had its own estates, often with their own related production and storage facilities. While most of the temple lands consisted of open farmland, there were also vineyards and gardens (Karnak alone had some 433 of the latter in the time of Ramesses III). Temple estates also included areas such as marshlands, quarries and mines, all of which were exploited for temple use in the running of the temple economy.

Temple lands were sometimes at considerable distances from the environs of the temple itself, and in the New Kingdom we find the temple of Sethos I, for example, controlling large areas even south of the second cataract in Nubia. In totality, the Egyptian temple thus very often represented no less than a slice of Egypt itself. The concept of microcosm is more than just a metaphor when applied to the Egyptian temple, for in many cases it functioned, as well as symbolically represented, a world within the world.
Temple Symbolism

In this drawing of a relief from the temple of Kom Ombo, Isis, the king, in the company of the gods, sets wildfowl in the marshes. The scene is symbolic of the king's role in controlling the forces of chaos.

In the world of giant metaphors which was the Egyptian temple, each element in the overall architectural programme played a role in symbolizing some aspect of the origins and function of the cosmos itself - a fact that has been touched upon repeatedly in this section and will now be addressed directly.

There is no single model by which we may understand the symbolic complexities of the Egyptian temple, for the ancient structures often represented many concepts that had evolved over time and in different locations and settings. In the developed temple, individual features might be designed and decorated to appeal to or to strengthen any one or more of these ideas. This is because Egypt's mythology was complex, many-faceted and replete with different, and even contradictory, ways of viewing the same facts - a situation which was nevertheless acceptable within the overall system of Egyptian religion.

From very early times, however, three great themes - original cosmic structure, ongoing cosmic function and cosmic regeneration - may be seen to be recurrent in Egyptian temple symbolism. Although separately developed, for the Egyptians these ideas were complementary, for the world's creation allowed its ongoing function and its regeneration - which was itself a form of continued creation. In the developed Egyptian temple these ideas are often all present, though some temples stress one aspect over the others.

Cosmic structure: original creation

At the beginning of time, according to a view which seems to have been ancient and widespread, a mound of earth rose from the ubiquitous primeval waters of existence. Eventually a great hawk or falcon appeared which settled on a single reed growing on this island. As a sacred place, the area needed protection, and so a simple wall stood around the reed and the god who perched thereon. At its most basic level, this myth is reflected in the structure of the Egyptian temple from earliest times, with the original mound doubtless being the mythical prototype for the revetted mounds of sand found in the early temple sites of Hierakonpolis and elsewhere (p. 202).

A great many features of the later, developed temple reflect this same idea of the domain of the god as a created world in microcosm. The temple roof was the heaven of this model world, and as such was usually decorated with stars and flying birds. The floor, correspondingly, was regarded as the great marsh from which the primeval world arose; and the great columns of the pillared courts and halls were made to represent palm, lotus or papyrus plants, with their intricately worked capitals depicting the leaves or flowers of these species, as much to symbolize the origin of life as to make the god's name known as the lord of such columns.

The low walls, often decorated with lotic scenes of plants, animals and human figures, were heightened by the temple itself, which was a model of the creation - in particular, the 'Flood Stela' depicted the god's act of releasing the waters of chaos. The sky of the temple, a divine space of eternity, was the abode of the sun and reflected various levels of the universe above, the celestial and the terrestrial. The divine city, the temple proper, was the cosmic centre which was the focus of attention and convergence of all the various elements of the cosmos.

In most temples, however, there was a gradual change towards the increased symbolic importance of the columns, and the temple gradually...
as much to reflect the nature of the original world as the original nature of the materials used to build such columns.

The lower sections of the temple walls were also often decorated with representations of marsh plants, and the entire effect was considerably heightened in temples where the outer courts and pillared hall were actually flooded – sometimes by design – in the annual inundation of the Nile. The ‘Flood Stela’ of Sobekhotep VIII which records such flooding at Karnak reveals that this could be seen as a divine sign in no way contrary to the nature and function of the temple. In the same way, as noted above, the girdle wall which surrounded the temple complex was often built with alternating concave and convex layers or foundation to represent the waves of the watery environment of the First Time.

In most Egyptian temples, the height of the various architectural elements gradually decreased towards the rear of the temple, while the floor level gradually rose towards the raised inner sanctuary. Symbolically, this was consistent with the lower, marsh-like environment surrounding the primeval earth mound that rose from the waters at the world’s beginning. The elevated position of the temple’s innermost area also symbolized the relation of the structure to maat – the underlying ‘order’ upon which the world rested – as the ramps and stairways leading up to the temple’s entrance and its inner sections formed visual reminders of the ramps or plinths upon which statues of the gods were placed and which were made in the form of the hieroglyph = used to write the word maat itself.

**Cosmic function: the solar cycle**

Just as these elements of structural design seem to have symbolized the original creation of the world, other aspects of temple symbolism represented the ongoing functioning of the cosmos by reflecting the sun’s diurnal cycle. The entrance pylons were built to mirror the form of the hieroglyph for akhet, ‘horizon’, on which the sun rose each day. The main
Great Temple of the Aten at Amarna to progress from relative darkness into totally unshaded light. Unless something similar existed at Heliopolis, this radical shift from the normal temple plan did not survive Akhenaten himself and appears to have left little in the way of lasting influence. In some later New Kingdom structures – such as the Great Temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu – separate chapels are sometimes found with open courts dedicated to the sun-god Re or Re-Horakhty, but this is a far cry from the totally solarcentric revisions of the Amarna Age.

Other symbolic forms in the standard Egyptian temple plan also echoed the daily solar cycle. The pairs of obelisks placed on each side of the entrance pylons were certainly solar-symbolic and thus sometimes dedicated to the morning and evening manifestations of the sun god, but they may also have functioned to some degree as a form of the two mountains of the horizon upon which the pylons themselves were modelled. The papyriform columns found in many temples – closed in the outer courts and open in the inner halls – could be symbolic of the sun's journey as the furled umbels of the plant open with the daylight.

Carefully located texts and representations of the sun god delineate this solar journey in many temples, and the heraldic plants or other symbols of Lower and Upper Egypt which are often placed on the northern and southern walls of temples (p. 37) may have been primarily utilized to strengthen, clarify and enhance the east-to-west solar journey motif as much as to show the intersecting cardinal directions themselves.

**Cosmic renewal: the temple as tomb**

There is also a third, somewhat less obvious, aspect of temple symbolism. Unlike the previous features of cosmic symbolism incorporated into the normal temple, the mortuary temple at Amarna was placed central to the temple and often given a funerary temple setting.

According to Egyptian belief, the temple stood in the starting position of heaven, earth and beginning of time, and served as a kind of wellspring or source that might pass through the temple to get to the gods. The idea is well-illustrated by the text known as an *ahlkeb* – the temple was regarded as the cosmic vessel holding the spheres or range of the cosmos.

Not only was the temple reflected in texts made during the Amarna period, but the temple and its architectural features were also used to reflect their structural and cosmological analogs. The kind found at Amarna were found in many sanctuaries from Old Kingdom times and appear to have been used to depict coffins, and, more abstractly, the life force, which could be seen as eternal and connected to the dead. These representations, more by means of comparison than imitation, were sometimes...
of cosmic structure and function which were incorporated into the overall design of the developed temple, the idea of regeneration or renewal effected by the temple as tomb was an important principle central to the meaning of many temples, but one often given more isolated expression within individual temple structures.

According to the Egyptian world view, the temple stood at the nexus of the three spheres of heaven, earth, and the netherworld; and it thus served as a kind of portal by which gods and men might pass from one realm to the other. In the same way that the temple pylon functioned symbolically as an akhet or ‘horizon’ in terms of the solar cycle, so the whole temple functioned as a kind of temporal and spatial akhet (see box). Just as the physical horizon is the interface between heaven and earth—and in terms of the setting sun between today and tomorrow, the present and future, this world and the beyond—so the temple, of whatever type, was regarded as an akhet or interface between these spheres or realms and was often described as such.

Not only do many temple representations and texts make this clear, but the interface between temple and tomb was also reflected in certain architectural features. A number of temples have within their structures features such as ‘false doors’ of the kind found in pyramid temples and private tombs from Old Kingdom times (p. 71). Further, the inner sanctuaries of Graeco-Roman Period temples often appear to be nestered like the shrines around royal coffins, and in all temples the image of the deity could be seen as a kheper-statue (representing the life force), while the offerings of food and material goods made to the god resemble the offerings made to the dead. Pyramids were associated with temples by means of their mortuary cults, private tombs were sometimes made to resemble temples, and temples were sometimes conceived as the tombs of gods or men or even contained such tombs (see p. 113, p. 148 and p. 193), so that the interrelationship between the rituals of life and death, this world and the next, were never distant in the minds and religious structures of the ancient Egyptians.