CONTENTS

Introduction: Temple, Land and Cosmos 6

Map 10

Chronology of the Temple Builders 12

I

HOUSES OF ETERNITY
Development, Glory and Decline

Temple Origins 16

Old and Middle Kingdom Development 20

New Kingdom Temples 24

A Glorious Decline 26

Early Travellers and Modern Rediscovery 30

II

BUILDINGS FIT FOR GODS
Construction, Growth and Change

Selecting the Sacred Space 36

Rituals of Foundation 38

Building the ‘God’s House’ 40

Decorating the Temple 44

Growth, Enhancement and Change 48
The Role of the King

"The king of Upper and Lower Egypt came. He made a great prostration before [the goddess], as every king has done. He made a great offering of every good thing ... as every beneficent king has done."

— Inscription of Udjahorresne

Nowhere in the ancient world was the ideology of kingship more highly developed than in Egypt, and perhaps nowhere in human history was it more deeply intertwined with religious beliefs. As a veritable son of god the Egyptian pharaoh functioned as a bridge between perceived and believed reality — positioned between gods and mortals, he acted on behalf of the gods to his people and on behalf of the people to the gods themselves.

The Service of the Gods

The king's involvement in the service of the gods began with the very foundation of a new temple or the expansion of an existing structure in the "stretching of the cord" ceremony (p. 38) whereby the site was oriented and the boundaries of the building delineated. Theoretically, from this point on everything which was done within the temple was done in the king's name and on his behalf. This included not only the building and decoration of the temple but also, once completed, its protection and upkeep, the perpetuation of its sacred status, and the regular sacrifices and offerings made for the care of the gods, as well as the special activities of the gods' festivals such as journeys to other temples or sacred locations.

To what extent the king actually took part in these activities can only be surmised. Egyptian kings are known to have travelled in circuit to participate in the festivals of the most important cults, but while they did often personally visit the gods to offer them and to officiate in important ceremonies, it is obvious that they could not have served all the gods all of the time in all of the temples. Thus, in addition to the recording of specific, actual, royal gifts to the gods (such as obelisks, statues and other monuments), the king's role is constantly depicted in the temple decoration in purely generic service. New Kingdom representations include scenes of the king in many aspects of the intimate service of the gods, ranging from offering food, drink, incense, clothing and other regular gifts, to leading the god's barque from its shrine in processional activities and participating in subsequent rituals.

The Daily Ritual

The primary ritual activities of the Egyptian temple — such as those which were aimed at the care and maintenance of the divine image — were performed frequently and with precise regularity by the king or, in practice, more usually by the priests.

Twice each day — in the morning and evening — the ritually purified king, or the high priest officiating on his behalf, would enter the inner sanctuary of the temple and break the seal on the door of the shrine containing the image of the god. Unveiling the image, the officiant would then prostrate himself before the god, and after intoning hymns of adoration he would circumambulate the shrine with elaborate censings and other activities such as the presentation of Maat (see below). The statue of the deity would then be brought forth and washed, its eyes lined with fresh kohl, anointed with fine oil and dressed in clean clothes and various insignia and items of jewelry.

Although various high priests claim that they alone performed these rituals or that they performed them with their own hands, it is likely that various attendants assisted. At Memphis, in the Old Kingdom, for example, the offices of 'robing priest' and 'keeper of the headdress adorning Ptah' were prerogatives of the high priest himself, though other high-ranking priests may have held practical responsibility for the god's wardrobe and treasures as they are known to have done elsewhere.

After the cleansing and revestment were completed, an elaborate meal was offered to the god, the
The King and the Temples in the Decree of Canopus

Although it is from the latest period in Egyptian history, the Canopus Decree — issued in 228 BC by a synod of priests in the reign of Ptolemy III — well shows the balance of interaction between the king and the temples, with the king’s benefits to the gods and their temples being reciprocated by priestly support and dedication for members of the royal family. The following points represent the main clauses of the decree:

I. Date.
II. Introduction.
III. Reasons for the decree. The royal couple are doing good deeds for the temples.
IV. Care of the royal couple for the divine animals. Return of statues of gods stolen by the Persians.
V. Protection of Egypt against foreign enemies and the maintenance of law.
VI. The mitigation of famine.
VII. Decision of the priests to increase the glory of the royal couple.
VIII. Appointment of priests of the ‘beneficient gods’ and arrangement of a fifth class of priests.
IX. Selection, rights and regulations of the new class of priests.
X. The festival for the ‘beneficient gods’ to be celebrated on the day of the heliacal rising of Sirius.
XI. Intercalation of a sixth epagomenal or leap day to prevent a displacement of the calendar year.
XII. At the demise of the princess Berenike the priests apply for her apotheosis and establish a cult for her.
XIII. The ceremony for the deified princess Berenike.
XIV. Setting up of a golden procession statue of the princess, with a special crown.
XV. Preparation of a second statue of the deified princess Berenike and its worship.
XVI. The living of the daughters of the priests. The ‘bread of Berenike’.
XVII. The manner of publication of the decree.

A painted limestone relief depicting bearers of offerings brought at the pharaoh’s behest, from the temple of Hatshepsut, Deir el-Bahri.
The Role of the King

A kneeling 'kneel' figure with papyrus and water offerings representing the produce of the land, from the mortuary temple of Ramesses II at Abydos.

Water, milk, wine and beer. Often the drink offerings were presented in two matching jars symbolizing the offerings of Upper and Lower Egypt.

All these foodstuffs were simply placed on the altar before the god's shrine or in the hall of offerings immediately outside the sanctuary. The practice of making burnt offerings is usually thought to have appeared only relatively late in Egyptian history and to have been of foreign origin - although a burnt offering is made in the Middle Kingdom story of the Shipwrecked Sailor, some of the offering scenes from Amarna appear to depict burnt offerings, and there are certainly instances of this practice depicted in New Kingdom private tombs. Normally, after the god had been given the opportunity to take whatever nourishment or enjoyment he desired, the items sanctified as offerings reverted to mundane status and were removed for distribution among the priests and other temple personnel. The offerings given to the deity were nevertheless acknowledged by the announcement that the deity had established ongoing life and stability for the king - and by extension, the people and land as a whole.

In the evening the process was repeated: the god once again received offerings and was then prepared for rest. The shrine was finally resealed and the footprints of the retreating priest swept from the floor in order to leave the sanctuary clean and unmarked.

The presentation of Maat

Of the many offerings which the king is shown presenting to the gods, the most abstract yet important was the 'presentation of Maat' in which the king offered a small figure of that goddess as a symbol of his maintenance of the order established by the gods. In the New Kingdom, Maat was primarily offered to Amun, Re and Ptah - the three great gods of the imperial triad which ruled in that period - stressing the great importance of the ritual.

As a deity, Maat represented truth, order, balance, correctness, justice, cosmic harmony and other qualities which precisely embodied the responsibility of the king's role. In presenting Maat, therefore, the king not only acknowledged his responsibility in this area, but also effectively maintained Maat through the potency of the ritual itself. There were also other ways in which the presentation of Maat symbolized the king's role. Maat was the daughter of Re and thus the sister of the king who was 'son of Re'; and the king could also be seen to be acting in the role of the god Thoth, husband of Maat, so that the ritual underscored the king's special, divinely related status. As a result, he is often shown in the company of the gods themselves in representations of this important ritual.

The king's presentation of Maat can be viewed, in fact, as the supreme offering into which all other offerings were subsumed. This equivalence of the presentation of the goddess with all other offerings can be seen in the epithet of Maat as 'food of the gods' and parallel statements which affirm that the gods 'live on Maat'. Emily Teeter, who has studied this ritual in great detail, has shown that representations and inscriptions of the king presenting Maat are in fact essentially identical to those in which the king presents food, wine or other forms of sustenance to the gods - and in some cases, depictions of the presentation of wine jars are actually labelled as the 'presentation of Maat'.

In fact, for the Egyptians, the metaphor went even beyond food and drink and could include virtually anything. Erik Hornung has pointed out that in one version of this presentation, the king intoned Maat only once - but he was not only offering to Maat, he was also offering to the king's wife and children - and the offering was made to the god, the king's father, the king himself, the king's mother, and the king's children. The offering was thus made to a god who was the father of the king, but also fathered the king's children. The offering of wine was symbolic of the king's relationship with the gods, and the offering of food was symbolic of the king's relationship with the king's family.

The king's presentation of Maat is thus a complex and multifaceted ritual, involving the presentation of food, wine, and offerings to the gods, as well as the presentation of the king's children and wife. This ritual is an important part of the king's role as a provider of food and sustenance for the gods, and as a provider of children and lineage for the king's family. The ritual is also a symbol of the king's divinity and his relationship with the gods and the gods' relationship with the king.
one version of the daily temple ritual the priest intoned ‘Maat is present in all your dwellings so that you are furnished with Maat. The robe for your limbs is Maat. Maat is breath for your nose…’ The ritual presentation of Maat therefore highlights the king’s role in the service of the gods. Not only did the king’s offerings supply the needs of the gods, but also from the Egyptian perspective through the offering of Maat he also renewed and strengthened the underlying fabric of the universe itself.

The king’s cosmic role

The maintenance of order symbolized by the ritual presentation of Maat was also expressed in many aspects of temple iconography. Scenes of the king smiting enemies, hunting hippopotamus or netting wild birds in the marshes are thus not so much records of isolated activities of the king as they are virtual models of the suppression of elements symbolizing the forces of disharmony and disorder within the land of Egypt and in the cosmos at large.

In fact, activities such as these were sometimes planned and performed in a ritual manner. In the Ptolemaic temple of Edfu – and very probably in earlier structures on the same site – the destruction of the inimical god Seth was vividly portrayed in an annual ritual drama in which an actual, or more likely model, hippopotamus – symbol of Seth – was destroyed by harpoons (p. 206). Here the fulfilment of an action under ritual conditions is evident, though typically in the representations of the event the king is depicted in the company of the gods.

In other instances, it is clear that the king is acting on behalf of the gods in mythical or purely ‘iconographic’ actions that could only be accomplished by deities themselves – for the king is a servant of gods of whom he himself is at least partially a manifestation. The king is thus frequently shown holding up the ceilings above the god’s shrines, which were decorated on their upper surfaces with the form of the sky hieroglyph to signify the king’s symbolic upholding of the cosmos.

Religious and political interaction

Alongside, and functioning together with the mythic and ritual aspects of the king’s religious role, there was, of course, a political reality – what Jan Assmann has called a theopolitical unity – which is not always clear to us. We do not know, for example, at what historical point the Egyptian king took over the role of highest priest of the various cults or if his office incorporated this from the beginning. We may surmise that the relationship between the religious and political spheres was bound by kings who saw that this was to their advantage in terms of strengthening their own position. But it must be remembered that the relationship between the king and the temples was a mutually profitable one which fulfilled the needs of both.
The transportation of the god's image to other sites. The great god Amun left his temple twice each year for particularly special events—the Opet Festival (p. 171) and the 'Beautiful Feast of the Valley'—and these events appear to be fairly typical of the journeys made by the gods in visiting each other.

Travelling festivals

In festivals involving the transportation of the gods the image of the deity was usually placed in its shrine on a small portable barque which was then borne on the shoulders of priests to its destination or to the nearest quay, where it was loaded on to a real barque for movement by river. The Harris Papyrus describes the grandeur of one such barque of the gods during the reign of Ramesses III: measuring 67 m (220 ft) in length, it was constructed of the finest imported Lebanese cedar and was covered with gold and other precious materials fit for its purpose.

The festival known as heb nefer en inet, the 'Beautiful Feast of the Valley', involved travel by both land and water. It appears to have originated during the Middle Kingdom in the reign of Nebhepetre Mentuhotep, and from early New Kingdom times mortuary temples on the west bank of the Nile at Thebes were designed to accommodate the barque of Amun-Re during this event. The festival was celebrated during the second month of shemu, the 'harvest' season—which, during the New Kingdom, coincided with the beginning of summer.

In the course of the festival, Amun of Karnak, accompanied by the other members of the Theban triad, Mut and Khonsu, and a large retinue of attendants, processed to the west bank where they visited various gods whose shrines were located...
there and also the temples of deceased and deified kings. The festival was doubtless originally a remembrance of the dead, in which the living members of families visited the tombs of their deceased relatives. As the festival grew in importance it also seems to have taken on aspects of renewal and rejuvenation as well as other meanings for its human and divine participants.

The renewal of gods and men
'Travelling festivals', such as the 'Beautiful Feast of the Valley', as well as those celebrated within the gods' own temples were often aimed at renewal, as can be seen in the ancient descriptions we have of the 'Festival of the New Year' and the 'Festival of the Beautiful Meeting', as they were celebrated at Edfu and Dendera. At Dendera, on the night before the Egyptian New Year's Day, the statue of Hathor was carried up to a special kiosk on the temple roof. Here it was positioned to await the dawn when it was exposed to the rays of the rising sun in order to infuse it with new life.

Similarly, the 'Festival of the Beautiful Meeting' celebrated at Edfu began with the arrival of the cult statue of Hathor on the day of the New Moon in the third month of summer, and can be seen to have had the same essential purpose, albeit in a more sexually oriented ritual. There, after various ceremonies, the statue of the goddess was placed in the temple's birth house along with the statue of Horus of Edfu and the two deities spent the next nights together until the festival's conclusion at the full moon.

Festivals such as these, whose main intent appears to be one of fertility, rebirth or other life-giving or life-sustaining aspects, can clearly be seen to be renewal oriented; and while not all festivals had as their goal the idea of renewal, once established, many tended towards this meaning. Thus the festivals associated with divine and royal homage, such as the birthdays of the gods, and jubilees and other festivals held in honour of the king, or even great events such as military victories, could all take on the underlying idea of renewal through the repetitive celebration of their original themes.

(Left) The goddess Hathor, here depicted on the column capitals of the roof chapel at Dendera, was the focus of important festivals at the temples of Dendera and Edfu.

(Right) A divine scene showing the Nile's inundation and the resurrection of Osiris, from the temple of Philae—both symbolize rejuvenation.
The essentially rejuvenative nature of Egyptian festivals may also be seen in the symbolic nature of a number of their offerings. For example, flowers — for the Egyptians potent symbols of life and regeneration — were dedicated in great profusion on festival days. They were often placed in holders in the shape of the ankh or life sign or offered in large bouquets (the Egyptian word for ‘bouquet’ had the same consonantal structure as that for life). Flowers could be offered as symbols of life and renewal at any time, but a compilation of the floral offerings dedicated in a little under three years at the Great Temple of Amun at Karnak shows the incredible numbers involved — well over one million offerings each year — and the evident emphasis on this type of offering.

**Floral Offerings at the Great Temple of Amun:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Offering</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fan bouquets</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tall bouquets</td>
<td>3,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scented bouquets</td>
<td>15,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bouquets</td>
<td>1,975,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flower bundles</td>
<td>1,975,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wreaths</td>
<td>60,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Flowers</td>
<td>620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strings of flowers</td>
<td>12,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowers (halves)</td>
<td>465,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowers (heaps)</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lotus (halves)</td>
<td>144,720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lotus bouquets</td>
<td>3,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small lots (halves)</td>
<td>110,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lettuce and flower bouquets</td>
<td>19,150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 4,786,181 floral offerings

(Above left) A nome god bearing offerings: a detail of a temple relief of the 19th dynasty.

(Above) The festival calendar from Kon Ombo, reign of Ptolemy VI, c. 170 BC.
The perpetuation of festivals
As is so often the case in many of the world’s religions, some of the festivals celebrated in ancient Egyptian temples continued beyond the life of the temple and the gods. In certain cases they have even survived in their essential forms to the present day.

For example, the great festival day in honour of the rising of the Nile which was celebrated in the second month of the harvest season in later Egyptian history, equivalent to 19 June was important enough in the culture of the Egyptians and so embedded in their consciousness that it passed into the calendar of Christian festivals as the feast day of St Michael. Furthermore, St Michael is the patron saint of the Nile and his feast day is still celebrated by the Coptic church on 19 June.

At Luxor a Christian basilica was built in the northeast corner of the first court of the temple which was in turn later replaced by a mosque dedicated to a locally venerated Moslem saint Abu el-Haggag. Even today, the portable barque of this saint is annually pulled through the temple and streets of Luxor in the re-enactment of a custom clearly harking back in its earliest form to Luxor’s great Opet Festival of ancient times (p. 171).

The Festival Calendar

The Egyptian calendar had three seasons: akhet (flood); peret (growth); and shemu (harvest), each divided into four 30-day months – theoretically approximating our mid-July to November; mid-November to March, and mid-March to July. In addition, four so-called epagomenal or additional days were dedicated to the ‘birthdays’ of certain deities in order to bring the year to a 365-day total. In reality, however, the seasons moved progressively forward – beginning a little earlier each year – due to the quarter-day discrepancy between the length of the Egyptian calendar year and the actual solar year.

Festivals of many types were scheduled throughout the year, with special provisions for each new moon as well as festivals tied to specific seasons. The dates and offerings of these recurrent festivals were carefully recorded and were inscribed on temple walls from Old Kingdom times. Such festival calendars appear in valley temples of pyramids and sun temples of the 5th dynasty and doubtless continued to be engraved in Middle Kingdom temples, although none has yet been recovered. More evidence survives from the New Kingdom, and examples of temple calendars may be found at Karnak, Abydos, Elephantine and at western Thebes in the Ramessseum and Medinet Habu. From the Greco-Roman Period similar calendars are found in the temples of Dendera, Edfu, Esna and Kom Ombo.

According to these calendars, some of the major festivals of the Egyptian year were as follows (most festivals without locations were of regional or national character):

Akhet: Season of Inundation
First month: Opening of the Year; Festival of Osiris; Festival of the ‘Departure’ of Osiris (Abydos); Festival of Thoth; Festival of Intoxication (a festival of Hator)
Second month: Festival of Ptah South of his Wall (Memphis); Opet Festival (Thebes)
Third month: Festival of Hator (Edfu and Dendera)
Fourth month: Festival of Sokar, Festival of Schedes

Peret: Season of Growth
First month: Festival of Geb; Festival of the Coronation of the Sacred Falcon (Edfu); Festival of Min; Festival of the ‘Departure’ of Miat
Second month: Festival of Victory (Edfu); Great Brand Festival
Third month: Small Brand Festival; Festival of Amon-Re
Fourth month: Festival of Re-nenettet

Shemu: Season of Harvest
First month: Festival of Khonsu; Festival of the ‘Departure’ of Min
Second month: Beautiful Feast of the Valley (Thebes)
Third month: Festival of the Beautiful Meeting (Edfu and Dendera)
Fourth month: Festival of Re-Horkhy; Festival of the Opening of the Year

Epagomenal Days
Festivals of Osiris, Horus, Seth, Isis and Nephthys (celebrated on five successive days)

The role of the temple in the ancient world
In the ancient world the boundary between the human and the divine was blurred by the belief that the gods were present in the community. The temple was a microcosm of the world, the priestly class performed the role of the hereditary king, and the pharaoh was considered a god. They were the mediators between the gods and their people. The priests and the people prayed and offered sacrifices and the pharaoh was the living god. The temple was the heart of the community and the people turned to it for help in times of need. The temple was also a symbol of the pharaoh’s power and control over the people. The temple was a place where the people could come to seek the pharaoh’s protection and to offer sacrifices in gratitude for his help. The temple was also a place where the people could come to seek the pharaoh’s protection and to offer sacrifices in gratitude for his help. With the decline of the pharaoh’s power (such as the decline of the New Kingdom) the temples were regarded as symbols of the pharaoh’s power and control over the people.
The role of the common people in worship

In the earlier periods of Egyptian history, the boundary between the priesthood and the laity was blurred by the fact that temple service was conducted by individuals who, after their assigned rotation of duties, returned to secular work in their communities. Later, in New Kingdom times, when the priestly offices became professional and largely hereditary ones, the situation changed considerably, though Herodotus’ assessment of the Egyptians – ‘They are religious beyond measure ... more than any other people’ – seems to have applied not only to the great temples with their thronging priesthoods and burgeoning estates, but also to the piety of many of the common people themselves. Religious altars and shrines of minor household deities were often to be found in Egyptian homes, and many people placed votive offerings in the temples ranging from simple beads and trinkets to finely carved and painted statues and stelae. Votive stelae were of different types, though many requested favours from the gods and sometimes gave thanks for their help when it seemed that a request to a god had been granted. The so-called ‘hearing ears’ of the temples (p. 71) and the colossal statues before their pylons (p. 59) were also readily accessible to the people as mediators of their prayers and requests to even the greatest of the gods.

Apart from these aspects of individual and personal religious activity, the common people also involved themselves, to the level that they were able, in the festival worship of the temples. They gathered to greet the processions of the gods directly outside the temple entrances and, in many cases, around the perimeters of their outer courts, as is evident from the Ptolemaic name for this area, the hall/court of the multitude, and the hieroglyphic signs representing the people of Egypt which were often inscribed on their walls and columns to indicate where the common people were allowed to stand.

With the exception of some apotropaic festivals (such as those of the epagomenal days which were regarded as being unlucky), textual evidence makes it clear that the Egyptian people eagerly anticipated festivals not only as a respite from labour but also as joyous events in their own right. Often the king would present awards and gifts on festival days, and the great number of offerings given to the temples at these times meant surpluses of fresh produce which, in some cases, were distributed among members of the community at large. But, beneath the general atmosphere of revelry inherent in many of their religious holidays, it seems clear that most Egyptians took their relationship with the temple seriously. One of the most poignant illustrations of this is seen in the countless shallow holes scraped into the outer walls of temples by devout individuals wishing to take away a small part of the sacred building – albeit only dust – for the purposes of healing and devotion: a practice which began in very ancient times and continued even long after the temples ceased to function.