The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt

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With 535 illustrations, 173 in color

Thames & Hudson
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 to 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
A painted limestone relief depicting bearers of offerings brought at the pharaoh's behest, from the temple of Hatshepsut, Deir el Bahri.

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 238 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 deification 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 'beneficent 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 'beneficent 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.

(Opposite) A relief showing the shrine of the cult image of Amun being opened by the king, from the temple of Sethos I at Abydos. Direct service of the image of the god was a royal prerogative exercised on at least certain occasions.

(Left) The jubilee 'race' was another royal rital that affirmed the king's relationship with the gods through the fulfillment of his divinely sponsored role. This relief shows Djetser engaged in the ritual run, from the 'South Tomb' in his pyramid complex at Saqqara.
The Role of the King

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

The king himself is shown presenting a variety of offerings in this relief of Amenophis III in the barque shrine at Luxor Temple. The offerings are represented both in literal depictions and in a formulaic tabular version.

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
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.