An Exemplar of Ptolemaic Egyptian Temples

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Abstract

Ancient Egyptian monuments have been objects of awe and study since their erection in ancient times. Throughout the ages many have sought to discover and teach the hidden truths embedded in these grand temples and tombs. The sacred landscape that the Egyptians created remains intriguing in our modern age. Now, more than ever, we have the responsibility to teach in a manner which holds true to both academic and educational pursuits, while retaining respect for the ancient Egyptians, and to utilize technologies which will allow this goal to most elegantly come to fruition. This paper will describe key architectural and theological aspects of a typical Ptolemaic Egyptian temple and explicate how and why they were chosen to be embodied in PublicVR's Virtual Egyptian Temple. As a three-dimensional computer graphic, it does not represent any particular temple, but is instead an exemplar – an idealized example of its category. This way, it clearly and cleanly supports educational narratives which increase early understanding of Egyptian culture through the architectural remnants of its archaeological record.

Keywords: Egypt, Temple, Ptolemaic, Exemplar, PublicVR

1. Temple Development in Ancient Egypt

There are two main temple forms in ancient Egypt: houses of the gods (*per netjer*) and "mortuary" (also known as "memorial") temples. Our virtual temple is modelled after the former. The primary function of the *per netjer* was to house and sustain a specific deity. Every day the gods of the temple were dressed, fed, cleaned and pacified in an attempt to guarantee the continuation of *maat* (SAUNERON 2000, 75). *Maat*, the most important theological concept in ancient Egypt, can be translated as "justice", "truth" and "order" (DUNAND 2004, 145). As Ancient Egyptian temples were constructed as divine microcosms, all official action within the temple existed dually in the human and divine realms. Thus, the temple's architectural forms were representative of the cosmos. The large pylons (entry gateways) separated the profane, human realm from the sacred space of the temple where the divine could be safely engaged. Sacred space was created through a series of ritualized performances, beginning with the consecration of the temple (WILKINSON 2000, 38).

The earliest temple evidence in Egypt comes from Nekhen (Greek Hierakonpolis - 'city of the falcon') during the Early Dynastic period, approximately 3500BCE. Early temple shrines seemed to be constructed in one of two forms depending upon their location in Upper or Lower Egypt (WILKINSON 2000, 17). Their forms continued to develop, as argued by Kemp, through styles termed 'preformal,' 'early formal,' 'mature formal,' and 'late formal' (KEMP 2006). During the Old Kingdom, temple structures were most often found in asso-

ciation with pyramid complexes. Their alignment in a north-south orientation evoked stellar theology which dominated royal ideology at the time. During the Fourth dynasty, the orientation of the temples changed to an east-west axis which would be typical of later temple structures (WILKINSON 2000, 20). Notable Middle Kingdom (c. 2080-1640 BCE) innovations include the common use of stone and purposeful architectural symmetry. Although the Middle Kingdom architecture was characterized by archaizing tendencies, it witnessed the innovation of the tripartite temple which became standardized in the New Kingdom: court, pillared hall,
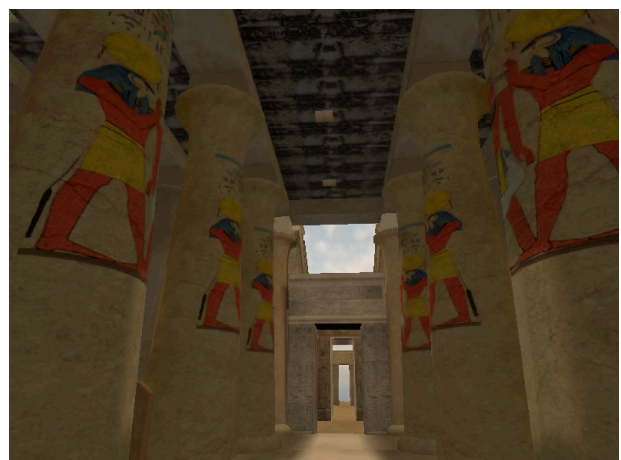

Figure 1: *Temple axis from sanctuary looking out.*

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sanctuary (WILKINSON 2000, 22).

2. The Virtual Egyptian Temple

The New Kingdom (c. 1550-1069 BCE) and Ptolemaic Period (c. 323-30 BCE, the period of Greek occupation) witnessed the rise of building programs on an unparalleled scale. Native Kings' desire to outdo their predecessors and Greek rulers' desire to legitimize their rule motivated grander and more challenging projects. During this period a standardized temple plan was established which was applied not only to houses of the gods, but to mortuary temples as well. This standard plan consisted of the three part system mentioned above – court, pillared hypostyle hall, sanctuary – but was now introduced by a monumental pylon gateway and temple walkway as can be seen in the Virtual Egyptian Temple. Temple consecration and orientation was explicitly predetermined, often surrounding a site of mythical significance. The ancient Egyptian temple can be separated into distinct architectural regions – the three sections of the tripartite construction, by its differentiated levels of sacredness.

The modern visitor enters the temple through its monumental pylons after passing by landing quays and through rows of sphinxes. The temple, however, was designed from the prospective of a god, his domestic precinct. The god sat within his shrine inside of the sanctuary, which was the most sacred and protected region of the temple. From his shrine, the god could look out onto his sacred precinct (Figure 1, previous page). The shrine itself was usually a separate installation, produced out of stone, bronze or fine wood, with the doors almost always constructed in wood. The image of the god could reach heights that rivalled life size, but more often were only a few feet tall. Egyptian mythology dictated that the skin of gods was gold, with the exception of certain celestial deities whose skin was silver. Thus, most statues were gilded in gold. The sanctuary's ceilings and floors were slanted so its space was elevated and cramp. No windows broke its walls, making the room the darkest in the temple complex. The god sat, in essence, upon a *benben* stone – the primordial, earthly mound upon which the creator god of Heliopolis brought life into existence (See "Atum" in WILKINSON, 2003). Within the sanctuary, the creation of the cosmos was continually being repeated – as long as the god was appeased by the priestly presentation of offerings and *toilette* rituals. The most important days for the god of the temple and the Egyptian people were festivals during which the god left his sanctuary and was carried on a solar boat (called a *barque*) in procession. Although the Greeks adapted Egyptian festivals to integrate their own customs, many Egyptian festivals continued in their traditional forms throughout the Ptolemaic period. (See the Greek festival of Ptolemaia of Alexandria in DUNAND 2004, 285).

Once the god was placed upon his boat he was carried out of his sanctuary into the hypostyle, columned hall (Figure 2). The hall was constructed to mimic the marshes of the environment early after creation. Its columns were typically carved in the forms of papyrus plants, which were representative of the marshes of Lower Egypt – the delta region (KEMP, 2006, 71). In Egyptian mythology the sky and land were separated and supported by columns. The hypostyle hall's ceiling was, thus, covered in depictions of celestial bodies (WILKINSON 2000, 65). Surrounding the hypostyle hall were numerous storerooms, crypts and chambers. This section was only partially lit by slits in the ceiling and a screen wall which separated it from the peristyle courtyard.

The peristyle courtyard is the third and most profane section of the temple's tripartite construction. It is situated immediately before the pylon gateway. Symbolically, the courtyard represents the first occasion, the moment after creation in which the sun exists and extends his rays onto earth (WILKINSON 2000, 65). The courtyard represented the Egyptian earth, the realm of the living. This was the typical locale for festival, celebration and personal devotion which will be discussed later in this paper. The walls surrounding the courtyard were inscribed with scenes of festival. In the Egyptian mindset, inscribed image and word marked it for eternity, prescribing the court's function as a space for public ritual in mythic and earthly time.

Figure 2: *Hypostyle Hall*

The population enters into the festival courtyard through monumental pylons, or in some cases a series of pylons. The pylon gateways represent the *akhet* - the Egyptian word literally meaning "horizon". The *akhet*, though, was not only the horizon, but the *liminal* space between the divine world and the realm of the living (WILKINSON 2000, 79). Thus, as you would pass through the *akhet*, you would pass from the human realm into the sacred precinct of the gods – the temple. Likewise, as the god left the temple on procession, he

would exit his divine realm and enter into the earthly realm so that he could interact with the population. The outer face of the pylon was typically inscribed with scenes of smiting to symbolically ward off the profane and evil which lay outside its boundaries and to practically exist as a form of royal propaganda, recreated in the Virtual Egyptian Temple (Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Pylon With Smiting Scene*

Within and outside the principal temple precinct were numerous secondary sacred elements associated with the divine domicile: a sacred lake for purification rites, Nilometers - an economic addition, Mammisis or birthing houses which were theological birth sites of the god's main child, the House of Life (*per ankh*) which was probably a scriptorium of sorts, the Sanatoria - or sick house, where the sick could be brought and tended to, kitchens, workshops, studios and magazines, stores and granaries. These elements vary from temple to temple in location and even form – indeed scholars do not even know the location of many since they were found dismantled. Thus, the Virtual Egyptian Temple does not include these elements as an exemplar; however, if so desired such additions would be possible, albeit largely hypothetical. An enclosure wall ran around the perimeter of the main temple complex delineating it from the profane, threatening outside. It is called a temenos wall, which in Greek literally means to 'cut out.' In this way the surrounding wall of the Egyptian temple was built in order to cut it out of profane space and establish it as sacred. As a defining element, the enclosure wall is included in the temple.

Beyond the main temple complex laid great expanses of land owned by the temple. These lands were cultivated to be farmlands, vineyards and gardens. Immediately beyond the pylons processional ways, typically lined by rows of sphinxes, lead from the temple's main gateway towards a landing quay. The sphinx, besides being a modern icon of ancient Egypt, was a protective deity which could also represent the protective power of the reigning king. These causeways are often found covered in the Old Kingdom or tiled/paved in the New Kingdom and later. The quay stations were basically miniature temples, announcing a visitor's entrance into a sacred space from the Nile, or enabling the god to travel along the Nile. It also pragmatically acted as a docking point for boats during festival.

Way stations or barque stations are found along established pedal processional routes between temples. These stations allowed the human bearers of the barque carrying the divine Image to rest along their long journeys. It also provided them with an opportunity to perform rites. In later periods way stations became popular places for engagement with the divine oracle. Again, however, these elements are highly varied and not necessarily directly related to religious function of the temple and, thus, are not included in this version of the exemplar Virtual Temple which is intended to emphasize the religious aspects of an ancient Egyptian Ptolemaic temple.

3. The Temple as an Active Space – Festival and Personal Devotion

The ancient Egyptians perceived the world to be a series of repeated acts. Each act within itself was not important - but the continuation of tradition was. This is how maat was able to propagate throughout the ages. Similarly, the Egyptian temple was a series of symbolic elements whose totality represented a perfect, sacred world at the moment of creation before the profanity of human existence could bring *isfet* into being. Every structure within a temple carried practical, mythological and symbolic meanings. These meanings at times could corroborate each other or juxtapose. Indubitably, Egyptian theology was rooted in duals. For example, except for one case, obelisks were only ever erected in pairs. The overall temple represented the original creation of the cosmos. Although there are many creation myths in Egypt, most center around the arrival of a primordial mound upon which some deity, usually in the form of a hawk or falcon, initiated life. The sanctuary was meant to represent this *benben* mound which it was called by the Egyptians. The floor, thus, symbolized the marsh land from which the mound grew and the ceilings the sky. Simultaneously, the temple represented the continuation of the solar cycle. The *akhet* pylon gateway was the horizon from which the sun rose and into which it set each day. In the same manner the processional pathway followed the sun along its journey in the sky from east to west.

The temple acted as a transitional realm between the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. It was one of the few places where humans and the divine could interact. Because of the temple's transitional character, it was the site of festivals and processions for a range of purposes. The most common festivals celebrated fertility and renewal, ancestor worship, and the royal cult. Other festival types include consecration ceremonies, crowning and local mythological traditions reenacted. The best preserved enactment is the Contentions of Horus and Seth at Edfu and Denderah. We can stage reenactments of these rituals in the Virtual Egyptian Temple, but it

requires significant research, planning, and artwork (GILLAM, 2010).

In the virtual temple are objects of personal devotion for which archaeological remnants exist. The most notable of these objects are the offering tables seen in Figure 4. These flat, low tables were located throughout the temple complex, most notably within the festival courtyard. Here local and royal elite could present offerings to the god of the temple.

Typical offerings were incense, beer, bread and water. Other offerings like vegetation, or musical instruments could also have been presented to pacify the god. An additional mode of personal devotion witnessed in the temple was the installation of individual statues, intended to provide continual worship on behalf of an individual or family. One of the greatest advantages of the virtual temple is that we can add and subtract elements in order to emphasize certain theological or social aspects of ancient Egyptian life. The offering table is the most common form of sanctioned personal devotion which has left an archaeological record and would have been accessible to the masses, but a statue is an elite remnant. Unsanctioned acts of devotion in the form of graffiti are also evident in ancient Egyptian temples – especially in the Greco-Roman period during which many travelers visited these sites, inscribing their name or a message to the cosmos.

Figure 4: *Offering Table*

4. The Temple As An Educational Tool and Its Future.

The Virtual Egyptian Temple helps students and instructors engage with the archaeological remnants and cultural milieus of an ancient Egyptian Ptolemaic temple which are lost even to the modern visitor. Its 'virtual' nature allows for adaptations and immediate updates as new research develops. Importantly, we can reconstruct Egypt's Ptolemaic temples without harm to existing architecture or artifacts. This enables the focus of ancient sites to be on conservation, while the virtual site supports educational uses.

The term, *exemplar* refers to an idealized mental example of some category of thing (BARSALOU 1992). Member of the public with an interest in Egypt, but little time for serious study will develop a distorted mental image of Egyptian temples. Here, we have created the exemplar *for* them, simple enough to remember, but true to the material. It's details are not *complete* but what it does show is *prioritized* and *correct*. Next, we will document the temple fully, add a few more key features, stage simulations of rituals in it, and conduct learning experiments. See "http://publicvr.org for more information."

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