

## **THE VIRTUAL EGYPTIAN TEMPLE** by Lynn Holden



The game, “Gates of Horus”, takes place in a Virtual Reality model of an ancient Egyptian temple. The object of the game is to explore the model and gather enough information to answer the questions asked by the priest who stands at the doorway leading to the next part of the temple. If you answer them correctly, you will be allowed to pass through the doorway until you reach the innermost chamber, the sanctuary of the god of the temple. You will win the game if you answer the final questions and hear the wisdom of the god.

This model is based on the ruins of two of the best-preserved Egyptian temples from the time of the Egyptian kings (Pharaohs). The first is an earlier New Kingdom (c. 1100 BCE) Mortuary Temple at Thebes in Upper Egypt, called

Medinet Habu. The other, later temple is a City (Cult) Temple in the important Upper Egyptian center of Edfu, dedicated to the Hawk-God Horus, the patron of Kingship: it dates from about 150 BCE. These two temples were among the largest and finest in all of Egypt and represent great wealth and power at the local level. The temple is simplified having only enough detail to represent the essential elements found in real Egyptian temples. For example, there is only one of each of the four types of areas, while an actual temple might have had several Courtyards and Hypostyle Halls. Similarly, the hieroglyphics are larger than they would be in an actual temple, to make them more legible. Nevertheless, the scale and proportions of the spaces are correct, hieroglyphics make the appropriate statements, the images are in proper locations and so on. In this way, the physical form and dimensions of the temple symbolize the archetypal elements of ancient Egyptian culture, which evolved over many millennia.

The purpose of the game is to introduce you to the architecture of an ancient Egyptian Temple. This pamphlet is designed to give you some background about the temple. We will first give an overview of the parts of the temple, then look at some of the factors that shaped Egyptian architecture as a whole. Finally, we will look at the overall role of the temple in Egyptian society.

### **General Characteristics of the Temple**

Not every community had a temple: some temples served several communities. The temple was usually located at the heart of a town or city. Leading to the temple was a sacred road, usually lined with statues – often sphinxes, the life-giving animal form of the deity protecting the king. This road was the site of elaborate processions on special occasions, such as the arrival of the king.

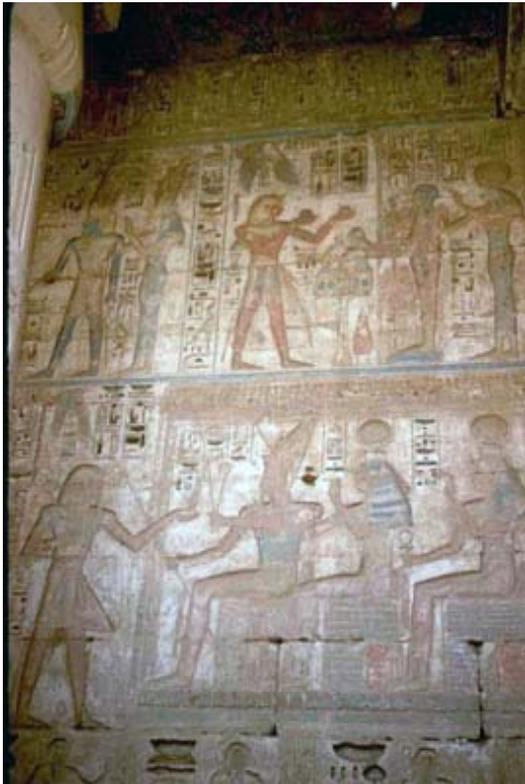
Though most Egyptian architecture was built of mud-brick, temples were generally made of stone, so that they would be eternal, and endure forever. They were usually oriented towards the east, so that from the interior, the sun would be seen to rise between the rectangular towers of the entrance Pylon. Because of this alignment, the light would, at special times, stream into the interior through specially sited openings to illuminate the images of the gods and the kings.

The forms of ancient Egyptian buildings often display a striking harmony with the shapes of Egypt's natural environment. The forms of the temple echo the horizontal lines and rectilinear



textures of the cliffs of the Nile Valley, and the mounds and pyramidal masses of the desert that surrounded it. An example of this is the Mortuary Temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Deir el Bahri, shown above. The colors of the stone used to build the temple and the paintings decorating it reflected the colors of the landscape as well. This connection with the environment is one of many manifestations of the ancient Egyptians' love of harmony and balance.

Temple interiors were richly decorated with scenes from the stories of the lives of the gods and of the kings. The ceilings were usually carved with stars and



painted blue to imitate the sky, sometimes adorned with flying vultures and hawks, or personified stars and constellations in boats sailing on the celestial Nile (the Milky Way). These scenes are almost always highly organized into structured registers with base lines, and the figures themselves arranged with the help of painted grid lines. The size and association of figures is also revealing, with the largest figures in a scene being the most important, and usually being attended by ranks of smaller figures.

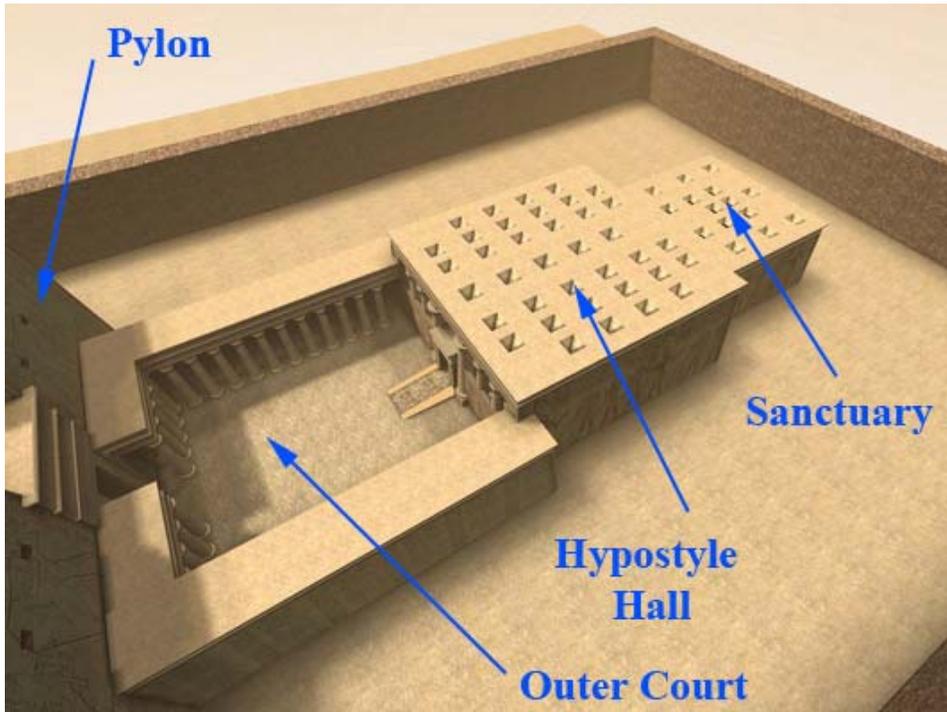
Like the architecture of the temple, the art within it was highly stylized and very traditional. It consisted of simple but effective shapes contained within an outline. The human figure was represented in a functionally stylized manner with the head, waist and arms and legs in profile to allow indication of action and movement, but with the shoulders and the eye of the face seen from front view to show details of the crowns, jewelry and clothing.



The color palette was very simple ~ red (ochre - iron oxide), yellow (yellow ochre), green (malachite), blue (copper salts), brown (dark ochre), black (carbon) and white (gypsum), but used very powerfully to convey vibrancy and contrast. Hieroglyphics often appeared in the scenes as well, which made them even more stylized.

A wall of mud brick surrounded most temples. Other buildings were often associated with the temple – many of these had what we would consider non-religious purposes. For example, many temples had large storehouses for grain, which was collected in times of plenty and distributed in times of scarcity – for times when crops failed because the annual Nile flood was too high or too low. Also, most temples had a “House of Life” – a center for education and a place where texts were stored. These texts contained not only descriptions of religious beliefs and rituals, but also literature and historical accounts – the Egyptians were particularly fascinated with history. The “House of Life” texts also included legal and governmental records. Land records were especially important, because landmarks could be washed away during a particularly high Nile flood. In addition to buildings, temple grounds often included a sacred lake, where purifications were performed and myths were enacted, as well as sacred groves and gardens.

## The Parts of the Ancient Egyptian Temple



The sacred precinct of the temple contains four primary areas: the entrance through a massive facade or Pylon, the Outer Court open to the sky and surrounded by a colonnade, the covered hall called the Hypostyle Hall, and finally an Inner Sanctuary, where a statue of the divinity was enshrined.

### The Pylon

There were often large stone statues standing on either side of the entrance to the temple. Sometimes they were colossal seated or standing stone statues of patron kings, which were often 30 to 60 feet high. Sometimes they were obelisks – massive pointed square shafts of stone, usually 70 to 110 feet tall. In other temples, these statues were symbols of the god of the temple. In our temple, we used statues of hawks, the symbol of the god Horus.



The front of the temple itself was called the Pylon – two large cubic shapes with slightly slanting walls, connected by a monumental gate. Above is a picture of the Pylon of the real Temple of Horus in the town of Edfu, in Egypt. From the start of the New Kingdom period, 1500 BC, the Egyptians built many of their temples with the pylon of this type.

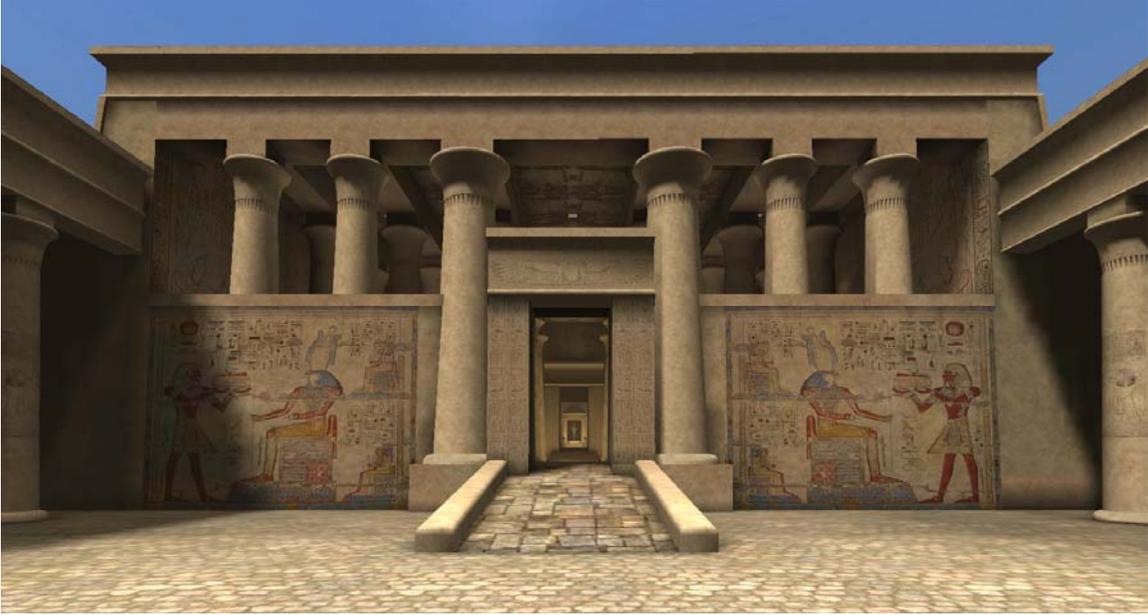
The left and right to halves of the Pylon symbolized the mountains to the east and west of the Nile valley (called the “Heavenly Horizon”), between which the sun was thought to travel each day. They also were associated with the throne of Egypt: thus, they were the location of special ceremonies related to the coronation of the king. The blocks were frequently decorated with tall imported coniferous-wood masts; colorful banners were suspended from them. The exterior faces of the two entrance blocks were usually decorated with carved figures of the king and the gods of the temple in scenes of military victory and triumph. The figures of the king could be more than 30 feet tall and were usually shown defeating the traditional enemies of Egypt in front of the main god of the temple. Often, the god was shown offering symbols of victory and power to the king – symbols such as

swords, scepters, or the Sacred Feather of Truth.

The monumental gateway in the center of the Pylon was called “the Bridge of Horus.” Horus, whose name meant “He who is above.” was the god of the sky and of kingship. The gate was fitted with massive cedar-wood doors 60 feet tall, often decorated with gilded images of the king and gods. Townspeople could offer their prayers at a special chapel of the gateway. The exterior of the Pylon was also the site of important public ceremonies affirming the power, goodness, and military valor of the king of Egypt.

### **Outer Court**

The first space inside the gateway was a large Outer Court that was open to the sky. Such Courts usually had a covered walkway supported by columns on each side. Altars and colossal statues stood between the columns. The paintings and carvings on the walls and columns usually included displays of the greatness of the sacred Name of the king, and colorful scenes showing the king worshipping the gods and receiving blessings and power.



The Outer Court was a public space used for many kinds of ceremonies. Sacred oracles took place here; they were often used to settle local issues or disputes. The Outer Court was also the site of seasonal festivals held every year. During many of them, sacred mystery plays were performed, dramatizing local and national myths. Pilgrims came from all over Egypt to take part in the festivals of the most important local, regional and national temples. At these events ordinary people could interact with their leaders, including the “Divine King” himself.

### **Hypostyle Hall**

The next room is the large, enclosed Hypostyle Hall. A forest of massive columns, up to 60 feet tall, supported the roof. They were usually decorated with plant-form capitals (papyrus, lotus, palm, etc.) representing the physical environment of Egypt at the beginning of time when the ancient Egyptians believed the gods lived on the earth. The Hypostyle Hall was dimly lit by

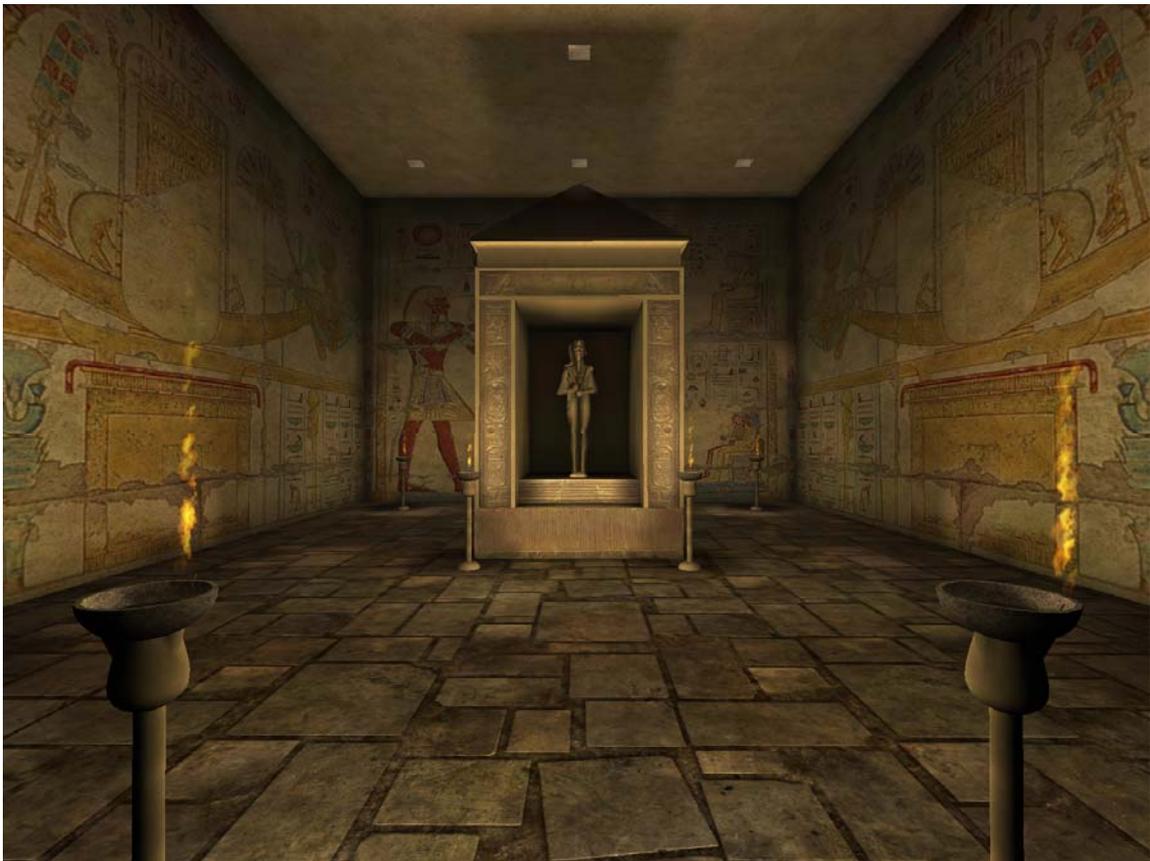
small windows in or near the ceiling, recalling the gloom of a dense thicket. The decoration painted and carved into the walls of the Hypostyle Hall showed the king performing important ceremonies that guaranteed the unity, security and prosperity of the land and its people. Usually there were life-size statues and offering places between the columns to commemorate important patrons and ancestors of the local community.



Only the Initiated were allowed to worship in the Hypostyle Hall. Every day the professional priests of the temple would perform the daily ritual of the temple, which maintained the daily life and routine of the god and his family. One important example was the Reversion-of-Offerings ceremony, where the daily offerings to the god were divided up and reused for the benefit of the ancestor kings, patrons and local heroes, who were represented by statues in the Hypostyle Hall. (Eventually the priests ate the food-offerings – they regarded them as part of their temple income-wages).

## Sanctuary

The innermost chamber was the Sanctuary, the most important and sacred place in the Temple. The Sanctuary represented the “Original First Place” (or Primeval Mound), which came forth from the “Primeval Flood” at the beginning of time. This is where the first god came down to earth. Only the king himself, or his local representative, the High Priest, could enter the sanctuary.



The sanctuary was very dark. It contained a large shrine, supported on a stone pedestal and containing a statue that was the “Living Image” of the deity to whom the temple was dedicated. The walls of the sanctuary were usually decorated with paintings and sculptures depicting ritual activities, along with other very intimate interactions between the king and the Great God. These

interactions were believed to guarantee the peace, prosperity, stability and continuity of the land and people of Egypt. The floor of the sanctuary was covered with special fine, pure sand – there was a special ritual when the king or high priest swept it clean of footprints at the end of each ceremony.

Around the sanctuary were smaller rooms to store ritual equipment and supplies for the essential ceremonies. One of the most important of these was a large wooden model boat, which was often gilded and elaborately decorated. It was used to carry a statue of the deity out of the temple at times of festival or pilgrimage. Since most long-distance travel in ancient Egypt took place on boats on the Nile, it was natural to think that deities traveled by boat as well.

### **Other Types of Egyptian Temples**

The temple in “Gates of Horus” is a model of a community temple. However, there were other types of temples in Egypt. The most common was probably the Mortuary Temple, which were sometimes called “mansions of millions of years”. These were memorial monuments, dedicated to the memory of one particular person, usually a King or local patron or hero. Sometimes, mortuary temples were associated with tombs and pyramids. A Mortuary Temple was located away from the center of the community, usually near a Sacred Mountain or the West side of the Nile – the side of sunset, where at the end of every day the sun god Ra descended into the Underworld. Though the visual forms of the decoration and ceremonies were similar to those seen in the City Temples, a mortuary temple was less universal in its functions and community roles. There were other, specialized temples as well, such as coronation temples and others.

## **Egyptian Architecture**

We have been taught think about architecture using the concepts of form, function, and beauty – categories proposed by the Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio. However, for the ancient Egyptians, these three concepts were all aspects of the same thing. The Egyptians did not divide up ideas into separate analytical categories, but were very interested in harmony, balance, and the relationship of the parts to each other and to the whole. For example, in the Egyptian language, the words describing the concepts of beauty, power and harmony/stability are interchangeable. To the Egyptians, beauty in a temple referred to the visual and functional harmony of the human activities that were always going on within it. The endless offering ceremonies, the prayers and chanting, were shaped by the form of the building and by the carving and painting within it. All were manifestations of the eternal cycles of creation, growth and transformation that were at the heart of Egyptian beliefs. The architecture of Egyptian temples was also strongly influenced by tradition and by symbolism; factors that have very little place in our own architecture.

Tradition had a central place in Egyptian society and art. The physical forms of religious architecture and their artworks and decoration were mostly developed very early in Egypt's history. By the later Old Kingdom (2500-2300 BCE) mature prototypes for most themes existed and were maintained faithfully for over 2500 years thereafter. Egyptian history contained long periods of peace and prosperity, such as the Middle Kingdom (c 1990-1750 BCE), the New Kingdom (c 1550-1085 BCE) and the Late Period (664-332 BCE). But there were times when Egyptian society was disrupted by environmental factors and by the political ambitions and mistakes of individuals. In some of these periods, parts of Egypt were attacked and occupied by other, newer civilizations, which

had developed in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Paradoxically, these times of instability made the traditional forms stronger rather than weaker. For one thing, the invaders adopted the traditions of the Pharaohs to consolidate their power; these new foreign rulers are often represented on temple walls in Egyptian costume, worshipping Egyptian deities. Instability strengthened tradition in another way as well. Every time Egypt was peaceful, unified, and prosperous, the Egyptians rediscovered and revived their old traditions. This continuity was a way of asserting Egyptian peace, posterity and power.

The ancient Egyptians valued the essential symbolic functions of architecture, which addressed their feelings, needs and beliefs and maintained the identity and continuity of their spiritual character. Major sources of this symbolism included the natural environment, the common human daily activities of that time, and the Egyptian understanding of the afterlife and the cosmos. Often these symbols had complex, multiple meanings, depending on the context. For example, the hawk was the symbol of power and light, but also clarity of purpose, and royalty. It was associated with several gods, including Re, Horus, and Kohnsu, the god of the moon.

One major source for this symbolism was the Nile, which the Egyptians called 'the Great River'. This mighty river originates in Central Africa at Lake Victoria and flows almost straight north to the Mediterranean Sea, almost 3,000 miles away. About 700 miles from the sea, the Nile encounters a region with very hard granite, which has created ten areas of very rough rapids. In ancient times, the most downstream of these was seven miles long and was called the First Cataract or the Great Cataract.



These rapids cut off Egypt from the southern part of the Nile and from southern Africa. North of the Great Cataract, the Nile encountered much softer rock, and, over millions of years, carved out a deep river valley called Upper Egypt. It is very narrow – 15 to 30 miles in most places – and is cut off from the surrounding desert by high cliffs. For an idea of the size of the cliffs, see the image above of Queen Hatshepsut’s temple at Deir el Bahahri. These deserts and cliffs made it very difficult for enemies to invade Upper Egypt. The silt carried by the Nile created a large delta called Lower Egypt that extended into the Mediterranean Sea.

The yearly cycle of the Nile shaped the daily activities in ancient Egypt. Sometime between April and June the water level of the Nile began to rise, swollen by the runoff from the rainy season in tropical Africa. Before the

advent of modern dams, it rose 40-45 feet in Upper Egypt and 25 feet in the Nile Delta. For four months, Egypt became a shallow lake, with only the towns and villages, which were built on mounds, rising above the waters. This was the season of Akhet, the inundation. When the waters receded in October or November, the landscape was covered with a layer of rich black silt. Akhet was followed by four months of weather that was ideal for agriculture. This season, called Peret (emergence or growth) was a time of intense cultivation, when crops (emmer wheat at first, later other kinds of wheat, barley, flax and a variety of vegetables) could be planted, weeded, and cultivated. The image at



left shows a farmer plowing with oxen. Harvest came at the beginning of the next season, Shemu (drought), which was extremely hot and dry. But even this dryness had benefits – it prevented waterlogging, the growth of mold and the build-up of excessive salt in the soil.

The climate in Egypt is subtropical and the vegetation is lush and diverse. The fertility of the soil gave them great prosperity and stability. Many parts of this natural setting – the landscape of the river valley, the plants and animals who lived there, the sky above them – were mirrored in the temple and used as symbols of aspects of both everyday and religious life. The natural setting was integral to the Egyptian world-view in other ways, too. Scholars such as Nadler have pointed out that Egypt was a land of great natural contrasts. The desolate, searing desert was never more than a few miles from the lush, crowded Nile valley with its tightly knit communities. The yearly cycle of the Nile, with its oscillation between 40-foot high floods and times of drought, was extreme as

well. The Egyptian love of balance and harmony was not because their lives were bland and comfortable, like our own, but because they had to face and reconcile extremes. As Nadler says

In Egypt, one is constantly impressed by the balance and interplay of the opposites: life and death, abundance and barrenness, light and dark, day and night, society and solitude. Each is so clearly described that one sees that the ancient Egyptians could not but understand the world in dualistic terms. Their landscape teaches the metaphysics of the equilibrium of opposing principles. (Nadler, p. 8)

This awareness gave a sort of tension to the Egyptian quest for harmony and balance. The contending forces were real and powerful, and were not going to go away. Harmony was precious and must be constantly struggled for. Perhaps this is why the Egyptian system lasted so long.

This struggle can be seen in Egyptian architecture. There were constant contrasts – between horizontal and vertical, dazzling light and deep darkness, huge masses and tiny, exquisite details – that were balanced and made into a harmonious whole.

Everyday life had its place in the symbolism of the temple as well. Temples and tombs were “homes” for divine spirits and beings. The formal buildings and the activities within them were religious elaborations of common human daily activities, which were stylized and extended to do honor to the importance of the gods and goddesses enshrined within them. For instance, in the innermost sanctuary, the statue that was thought to contain part of the god’s or goddess’s essence was “awakened” each morning by music, purified, anointed, dressed, and symbolically “fed” with food later consumed by the priests. In the evening, this process was reversed, and, at the end, the god or goddess was sung a lullaby.

Of course, religious beliefs were another source of the symbolism that pervaded the temple. Temples were believed to be eternal manifestations of the Heavenly Horizon on earth. Each town believed that its temple was built on the spot where the Primeval Mound arose out of the chaotic floodwaters that covered the earth at the beginning of time. This "High Place" depicted as a mound or pyramid, was the site where the gods first came down to earth and separated light from dark, good from evil and created human life. The annual flood cycle of the river Nile was believed to reenact this event every year. This belief in the Primeval Mound was symbolized in many ways in the architecture of the temple. For example, as you walk into the temple, the room floor levels ascend while the ceiling heights descend. Many of the columns were circular with plant-form capitals. When clustered together in a Hypostyle Hall, the effect was of the light filtering through natural thicket, the imagined original environment of Egypt at the beginning of time. Above is the Hypostyle Hall at the Temple of Amon at Karnak.

### **The Temple in Egyptian Society**

If a time-traveler from Ancient Egypt were shown the motherboard of a computer, he or she would find it a beautifully crafted piece of metal and ceramic. He or she would not know that it is the core of a machine which is a major tool for commerce and for learning, which connects people all over the world, and which performs other functions that he or she would find unimaginable. In the same way, if you were to visit an ancient Egyptian temple, you would marvel at its architecture and the painting and sculpture within it, but you would not understand how temples like it functioned as the heart of the Egyptian community.

The temple was the house of the local god or goddess where rituals served to praise and honor the gods and the kings, and thus to bring peace and prosperity to the land of Egypt. The temple was the largest building in the town and the only one built of stone. Its architecture and the content and style of its decoration were traditional and symbolic – some forms and styles were unchanged for over two thousand years. It was the focal point for pilgrimages and for rituals.

Festivals at the temple were common: some of them acted like our modern weekends, as a break from work, providing time for special acts of piety and for family gatherings to honor ancestors. Others marked important events in the Egyptian calendar – such as the New Year, the beginnings of the seasons, the birthdays of the gods, and the coronation day of the king. People from all levels of society met and interacted at the temple for festivals and other occasions. Adults and children, kings (called Pharaohs) and beggars, farmers, aristocrats, traders and priests all had roles in the rituals, celebrations, and daily activities of the temple.

Each year, every able-bodied person in the local community was required to do one month of service to their local temple. This service took many forms – sometimes maintaining the temple, sometimes making objects in the workshops attached to it, sometimes working on land donated to the temple. Some men even served as “lay-priests.” They purified themselves by ritual bathing, shaved their bodies (including their eyebrows), and performed priestly duties for one month and then returned to their homes and families. This requirement insured that the temple was integrated into the community and into the daily lives of the Egyptians to a much greater degree than we are accustomed to today.

The temple was the location of many different kinds of activities that in modern society are scattered in separate places. We worship in churches and temples, we celebrate in homes and public places, our business decisions are made in corporate offices,



we study science and literature in our schools and universities, our political and judicial decisions are made in courthouses and government buildings. In ancient Egypt, all these, as well as activities that we do not have in our society, were performed in the temple.

These activities not only shared a common site, but also, as we will see, had common assumptions, symbols and goals in a way that our institutions do not. In addition, temples were the nodes that connected local communities to their region and to the country as a whole. The temple also helped connect the mass of the people with the Egyptian state. Many priests served as government officials on the local, regional, and national levels. The priest also had other, less formal, duties, which linked the local community with the wider world. For example, priests informally evaluated the children in the village(s) under their care. Those who showed particular talents in any area – for instance, art or mathematics or leadership – were sent to the regional temple for further education. The most talented children were taken to the capital, where the most

promising of them were educated with the children of the Royal Family. The local priests would also watch for people who were restless or troublemakers, or resentful of the tightly knit village communities. These were sent off to the army or away on trading or mining expeditions.

The religious beliefs embodied in the temple also helped unite Egypt. This is not to say that the Egyptians had only one god – they had very many (a few are shown below).



Some gods were great universal cosmic creators and personifications of the forces of nature, such as the sky, the earth, the sun and moon, air and water, etc. Another important class of deities was related to special places like sacred mountains, springs or groves of trees, and in later times provinces, cities and towns. In addition, individuals and families had personal gods and goddesses often determined by profession or place in society, as well as ancestor spirits similar to those worshipped in the Far East today. However, unlike other societies, the great number and variety of gods and goddesses did not lead to

religious strife. Instead, they were seen as parts of a large, shifting interconnected sacred family. Exceptional humans (most notably the king) could be part of this family as well. In addition, the Egyptians had a concept known as syncretism, through which the attributes and powers of different deities could be linked or even merged for a specific purpose without losing their individual identities in their home temples. For example, Amen, the creator god worshiped at Thebes, and Re, the sun god, were merged to become Amen-Re the “King of the Gods.” Amen, Re, and Amen-Re were all worshiped at their own temples. This flexibility allowed Egyptians to harmonize the ideologies of different regions as time passed and one or another regional god became politically dominant and took on the role of State-God.

## **Conclusion**

The City Temple stood at the heart of the local community. It performed many different functions – political, economic, educational, and religious. The architecture of the temple and the way the temple interacted with the community reflected the ancients’ understanding of the nature and organization of the universe and their place in it. The components of the temple not only reflect the elements of Egypt’s dramatic physical setting, its local and national culture, and the complex interaction of its many gods and goddesses, but also illustrate the underlying contradictions and tensions of Egypt and the harmony and balance that Egyptian society used to reconcile them.