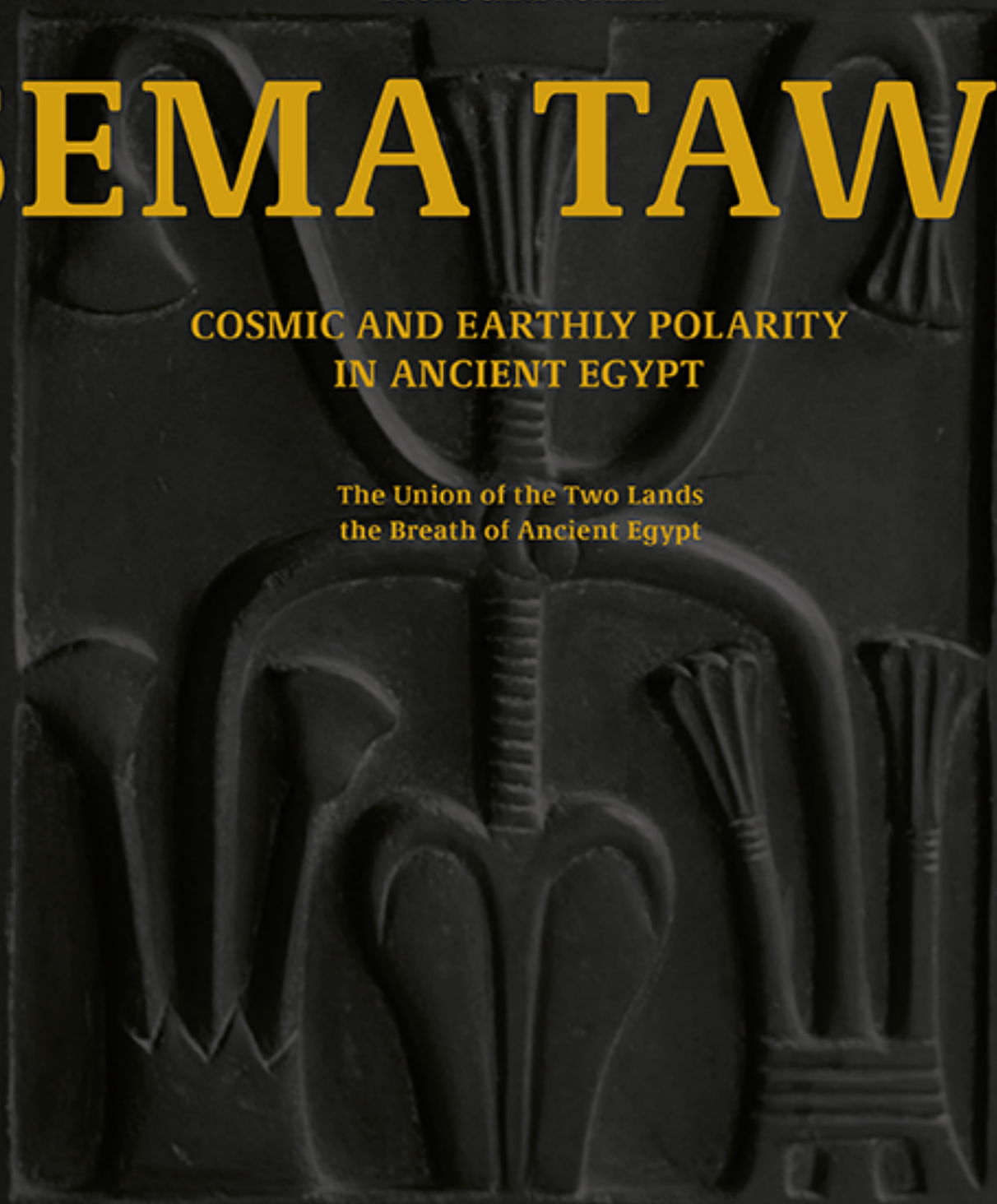


BRUNO SANDKÜHLER

# SEMA TAWY

COSMIC AND EARTHLY POLARITY  
IN ANCIENT EGYPT

The Union of the Two Lands  
the Breath of Ancient Egypt



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& traub

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## IMPRESSUM

Author: Bruno Sandkühler

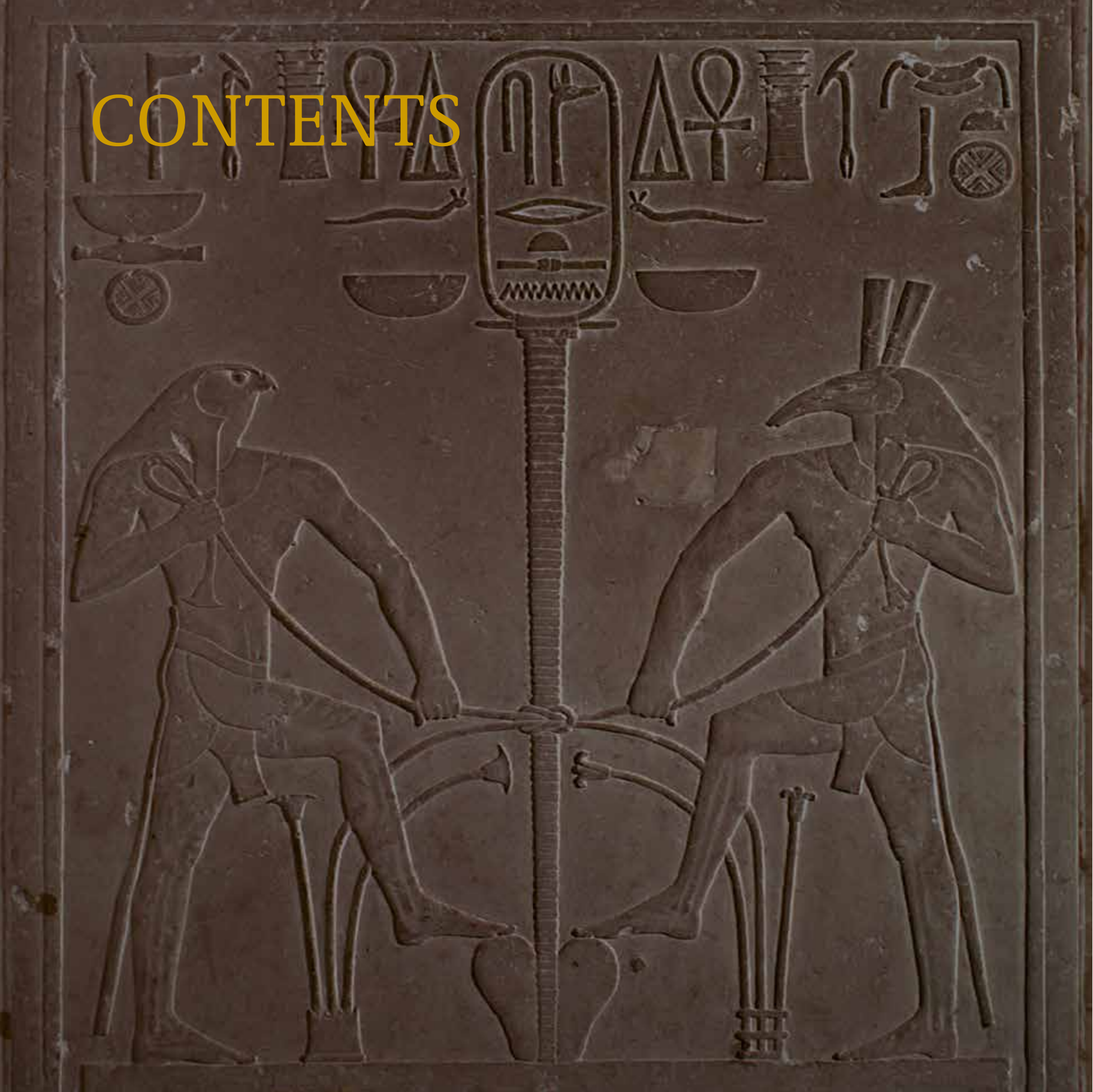
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*Spelled smꜣ tꜣwy in scientific works. Since ancient Egyptian writing does not clearly render vowels, special signs are used. For general purposes, the spelling sema tawy has become customary and is used in this book.*

*Bibliographic indications in the text are quoting authors and short titles. Full titles will be found in the bibliography at the end of the volume. As far as possible, English editions of the works quoted have been mentioned, but pages are quoted from original German editions. Quotations from French, German, Italian or Spanish papers have been translated into English by the author.*

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# FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In loving memory of  
Lissy Sandkühler-Burges  
Albert and Maria Burges  
Frank Teichmann

Breathing is definitely the most important prerequisite of human and animate life. Perceiving Egypt as a living Being, as the Ancient Egyptians used to do, its life depended on its “*breath*”, the multi-layered rhythmical respiratory process whose outward appearance was seen in the river Nile and whose hidden implications permeated every part of Egyptian culture. When at the beginning of my egyptological field work in Egypt I became aware of the omnipresence of the sema tawy symbolism in ancient Egyptian works of art and texts, I started to examine its various graphic expressions and their symbolic meaning, and to collect images and texts for comprehensive study and understanding. This book is the result of sixty years of endeavor and it is meant to furnish facts and ideas for further research, and to provide deeper insight to the vast community of people interested in ancient Egyptian culture, being a revised version of my German “*Lotus und Papyrus*” of the year 2017.

The book is dedicated to my wife Lissy, her parents and my friend Frank Teichmann. We formed the team that from 1958 to 1963 with a special permission by the Egyptian authorities and under difficult technical conditions undertook the UNI-DIA photographic collection of Egyptian works of art for use in schools and universities. My gratitude also goes to friends and their various contributions: David Stewart read and corrected my English translation, Jörg Esefeld offered to assume all the necessary editorial work, Susanne Puzicha gave the layout its beauty, and Lissy’s brother Johannes Burges who facilitated the digitalisation of our Kodachrome slides and made this edition possible by his generous financial contribution.

# THE LEVELS OF SEMA-TAWY

We can now perceive *sema tawy* as a kind of master key to understand Egyptian religious thought and civilization. It occurs in thousands of varying appearances on temple walls, in royal and private tombs, on statues, jewelry, furniture, objects of daily use and amulets, as well as in ritual and literary texts, from the predynastic period into Greco-Roman times. It seems impossible to oversee this multitude of images; nevertheless it is rarely mentioned in guide-books and lacks a prominent position in egyptological literature. This might be explained by the unspectacular nature and modest size of many of its images, but for ancient Egyptians they must have been omnipresent, albeit not usually heeded, being part of their habitual *ambiente*.

As the cardinal points were associated with specific forces and their benevolent or dangerous influences, orientation of temples was important. Anyhow the temple being an image of the cosmos, it seems that it was deemed more important to respect its inner coherence than its actual exact orientation. Thus the axis used to be regarded as the Nile for a reference, looking south towards the river's source when entering. Taking this into account, depictions almost invariably were correctly placed. In temples oriented east-west like that of Ramses III (Medinet Habu) on the west bank of Thebes, the left side is looking south and brings about the equation south=left, so that in other ones like the Temple of Horus in Edfu the king wearing the white crown will be placed to the left, the one with the red crown to the right, in spite of the geographic reality being different. As for the classic *sema tawy* image, Seth – or the king wearing the white crown – always appears on the south (or left) side, whereas Horus – or the king with the red crown – is seen to the north (or right); the same order is kept at the entrance of the temple, and the columns might be adorned with lotus stems on the south side of the central axis, and papyrus ones on its north side.<sup>85</sup>

Similar effects and rules existed regarding other natural phenomena observed in space: the circular movement of the stars around the “*immutable*” polar

star, the daily course of the sun, the waxing and waning of the moon and the yearly flood of the Nile. They all show some relation to various levels of *sema tawy*, but a complete analysis would surpass the goal of this book, as there are manifold cross-connections. The following sub-chapters are meant to give an overview and to provide some additional points of view for further consideration; inevitable repetitions will help understanding the universal nature of ancient Egyptian world-view.

## THE LEVELS OF SEMA-TAWY

<sup>85</sup> The arrangement of the sequence of images in temples today is described to the left and right of the observer

coming from outside. Originally it followed conversely the path of the God exiting his sanctuary.



east-westerly direction, the right side is the northern one and shows Asiatic prisoners, whereas the prisoners on the left or southern side exhibit African features. We now realize that this vast symbolic background extends far beyond Egypt proper. To keep Egypt breathing, to maintain the balance between Horus and Seth, between movement and arrest, means keeping Egypt powerful. The African foes from the south, associated with Seth, as well as the Asiatic ones from the north have to be subdued in order to establish *maat*.

3. The level of Architecture: the Temple as an Image of the World

From the time of Queen Hatshepsut and the temples of King Amenhotep III in Luxor, Egyptian temples kept their canonical design for over fifteen centuries, mirroring the main features of the country: the Egyptians used to look upstream, in the direction of sailing under the prevailing north winds, when speaking of their country. Thus the temple has a middle axis corresponding to the river Nile, and on the axis succeeding sections lead to its source, the innermost chamber where God dwelt in his golden image. The Egyptian temple was a “House of God” in the true sense of the word, the cosmic abode of god according to the hermetic motto preceding the first chapter of this book, wherein Egypt is called “the temple of the world”. It appears as an architectural transposition not only of the divine world, but also of Egypt, which again is considered an image of the cosmos. The symbolism goes so far that in the mortuary temple of Amenophis III in Luxor, the statues on the northern side of the great courtyard were made of quartzite from the north, while those on the southern side were of granite from Aswan. The polar forces impulsing Egyptian civilization took an architectural form in the temple’s shape.<sup>108</sup> At the same time every temple was regarded as a living being. We find the different temples and chapels of Queen Hatshepsut depicted on the outer wall of the Red Chapel as female or androgynous spirits, offering

the produce of their estates (figs. 47, 49). As a spiritual being, every temple had a biography.<sup>109</sup> When its span of life was fulfilled, it had to be buried and to resurrect. This might be the reason why a number of temples in the most sacred locations of the country are of later date, although it is known that they had been preceded by older ones. This is the case in Philae, in Dandara, in Hermopolis and, as we now will see, in Edfu. Before considering the details of the elaborate symbolism of the temple, let us first look at the participation of the gods throughout the foundation and building process. Ancient Egyptian textual sources are rather secretive when it comes to descriptions of religious or technical procedures. Nevertheless there are certain scenes that appear regularly and allow a fair overall view, and in the late and Ptolemaic Period inscriptions on temple walls are more talkative and reveal an increasing number of further details. Especially the temple of Horus at Edfu in Upper Egypt is a rich source of information that has been made accessible by the splendid publication of Dieter Kurth. An inscription running along the outer wall tells of the founding by the gods.<sup>110</sup> Scenes on the walls of several temples illustrate this process, one of the earliest showing queen Hatshepsut, together with Seshat, the goddess of measuring and geometry, perform the “stretching of the rope” to outline the ground plan of the temple,<sup>111</sup> taking into account the position of the stars, especially of Orion-Osiris.<sup>112</sup>

When finally the building was completed, the god would be invited to take possession of it in a solemn procession:

He beheld His temple admirably built,  
resembling the sky that bears his Ba  
His heart strove to unite with his throne,  
to take his place in the sanctuary.  
He opened His mouth and spoke to the gods  
whose Bas were in his majesty’s retinue:

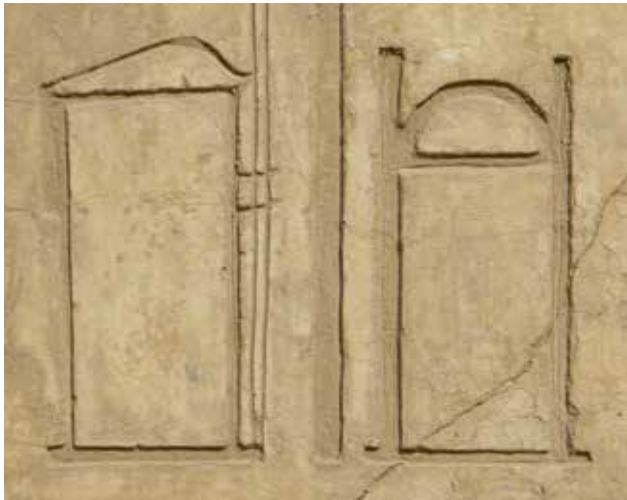
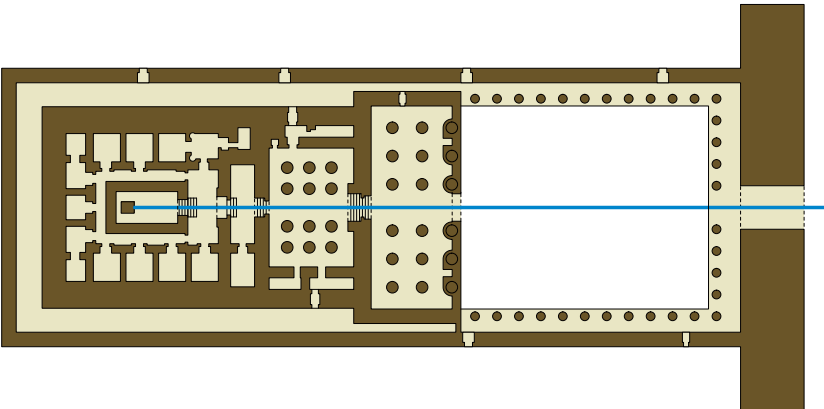
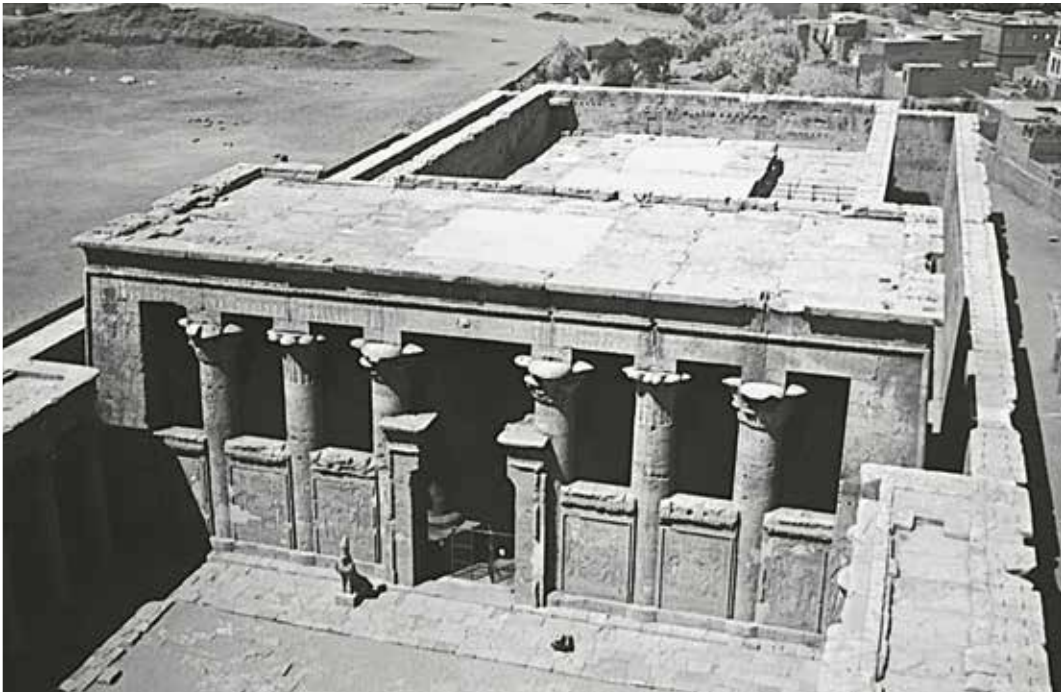


Fig. 42: Queen Hatshepsut and goddess Seshat extending the rope. Chapelle rouge, Karnak OAM

Fig. 43: Hieroglyphs showing primeval sanctuaries.

Fig. 44: Edfu, Temple of Horus. General view from Pylon.

Fig. 45: Schematic ground plan of classical Egyptian temples, based on the fully preserved one of Edfu.



108 Ricke, in: Göttinger Vorträge, p.202.

109 Reymond: Mythical Origin, pp.166, 184 sq; Kurth, Treffpunkt, p.153 sq.

110 Kurth, Treffpunkt p.70.

111 The inscription points to the fact, that the king and Seshat perform

these works “personally” (Kurth: Edfu, 31; Kurth: Treffpunkt, 70, 249)

112 Moret, Caractère religieux, 132





Fig. 46: Nome spirits of Upper Egypt with Lotus, offering their produce, Abydos.

Fig. 47: Female temple- and androgynous spirits of temples, waters, and nomes, Chapelle rouge, Karnak OAM, south side.



Fig. 48: Nome spirits of Lower Egypt offering their produce, Abydos.

Fig. 49: Female temple- and androgynous spirits of temples, waters, and nomes, Chapelle rouge, Karnak OAM, north side.



*“Come, let us enter... to take possession [of the temple] that our hearts desire”.<sup>113</sup>*

In connection with certain rituals and as hieroglyphic signs, we frequently find images of primeval forms of Egyptian temples similar to those erected in the *Heb-sed* courtyard of the Saqqara precinct (see fig. 43 and 106-107). They already present different forms for Upper and Lower Egypt respectively. A polarity might also be detected in the chapels of the pyramid precincts, e.g. in the Step Pyramid of Saqqara and its southern tomb, as we will see in a later chapter.

Let us now take a closer look at the basic structure of temple buildings found in many places all over Egypt,

choosing the temple of Horus at Edfu as the most complete example. They all have an exoteric aspect that exhibits images stemming from our familiar world of material appearances, and an esoteric one of ritual performance and encrypted references. Both of these levels appear interwoven into the whole of the temple organism.

On an exoteric level, scenes are symmetrically grouped along the central axis representing the Nile. Like the fertile strip along the river enabling agricultural life, various beings are pictured in the lower register, along with plants and animals. Also the personified provinces are seen, identified by their names on their heads, presenting their fruits on a tray, and we might even

encounter spirits of canals or temples. Thus the lower register of every temple represents the agricultural and mineral wealth of the country, the fundament it stands on.

The builders who designed the temples and determined the distribution of the various scenes on the walls must have known of the esoteric meaning behind all these images. Each of these personifications represented a specific part of the sacred geography of Egypt and stood in relation to the ritual scenes in the registers above. Only the priests understood the texture of scenes and its elaborate symmetrical patterns. Sometimes a wall appears transparent: on one side the king receives something from a god, on the opposite side

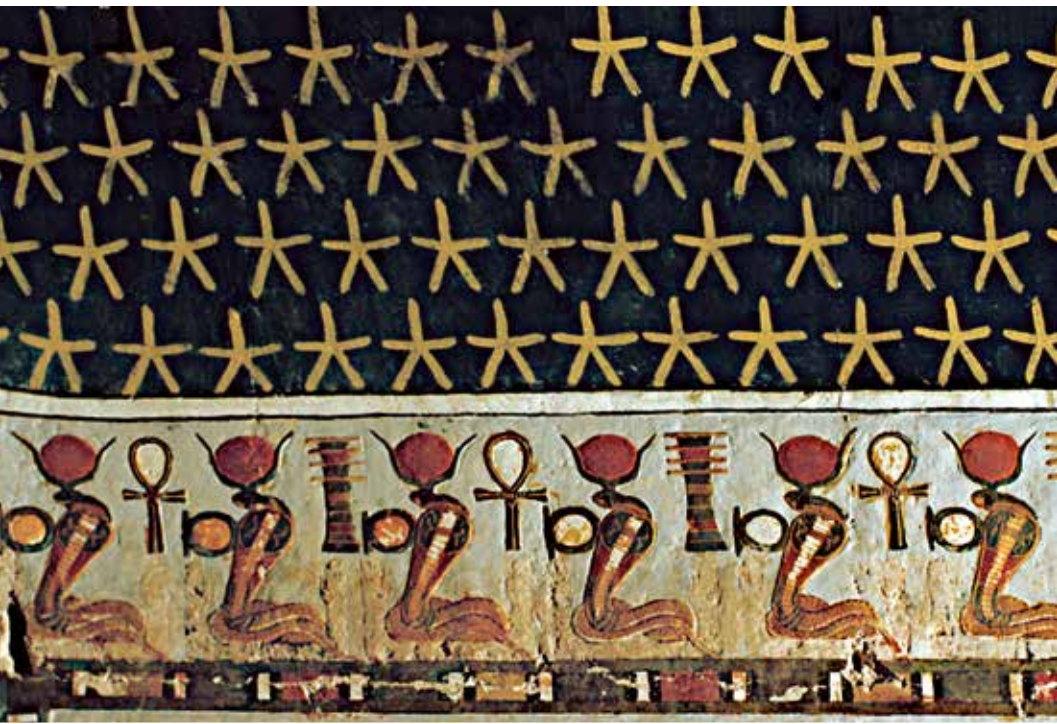




we find it in his possession. In the temple of Edfu, the path of sun and moon is shown connecting the naos with the *Mesenit-chapel*<sup>114</sup> behind it. As a general rule, religious rituals adorn the inner walls, whereas the outer ones tell of expeditions and of military campaigns. Although the columns represent trees, they are at the same time “*the arms of god Shu, holding up the sky*”, and each one of them shows an offering ritual for one of the gods, Upper Egyptian gods east, and Lower Egyptian ones west of the middle axis. The ceiling typically is adorned with stars or else shows astronomical scenes as in the Ramesseum on the West Bank of Luxor, or in the temple of Hathor in Dandara.

Albeit the temple and its writings and depictions were not meant to be looked at and studied, seeing and hearing belongs to their living structure. We must recall that ritual recitation and music have been an important part of temple life. When in Edfu we pass from the first hypostyle hall to the second one, looking at the lintel above the doorway, we see the sun-boat with disk, accompanied by the human senses, sight and taste, smelling and touch; similar depictions can be found in Kom Ombo on the rear wall, and in Abydos Thoth is accompanied by personified “*seeing*” and “*hearing*” on the jamb of a doorway.<sup>115</sup> When the king or an officiating priest entered the temple for the daily service, he came from outside, and he had the experience of a narrowing space, passing through the “*horizon*” of the towering pylon, traversing the open courtyard, then the sequence of halls, huge doors opening before him, his path leading slightly upwards, the ceiling lowering, until he would remove the seal from the door of the innermost sanctuary and stand in front of his god. It was a way inwards: “*To enter the temple by the king personally, in his shape as High Priest of Horus. To ascend the steps. To open the view of the god who dwells in his splendid shrine in the sanctuary.*”<sup>116</sup>

The god who dwelt in his golden statue inside the holy of holies, when exiting on procession, made the



Left page, Fig. 50: Hypostyle Hall with Astronomical ceiling, Dandara.

Fig. 51: Starred ceiling, and rebus frieze, sanctuary of Anubis, Dei el-Bahari temple of Queen Hatshepsut, Thebes.

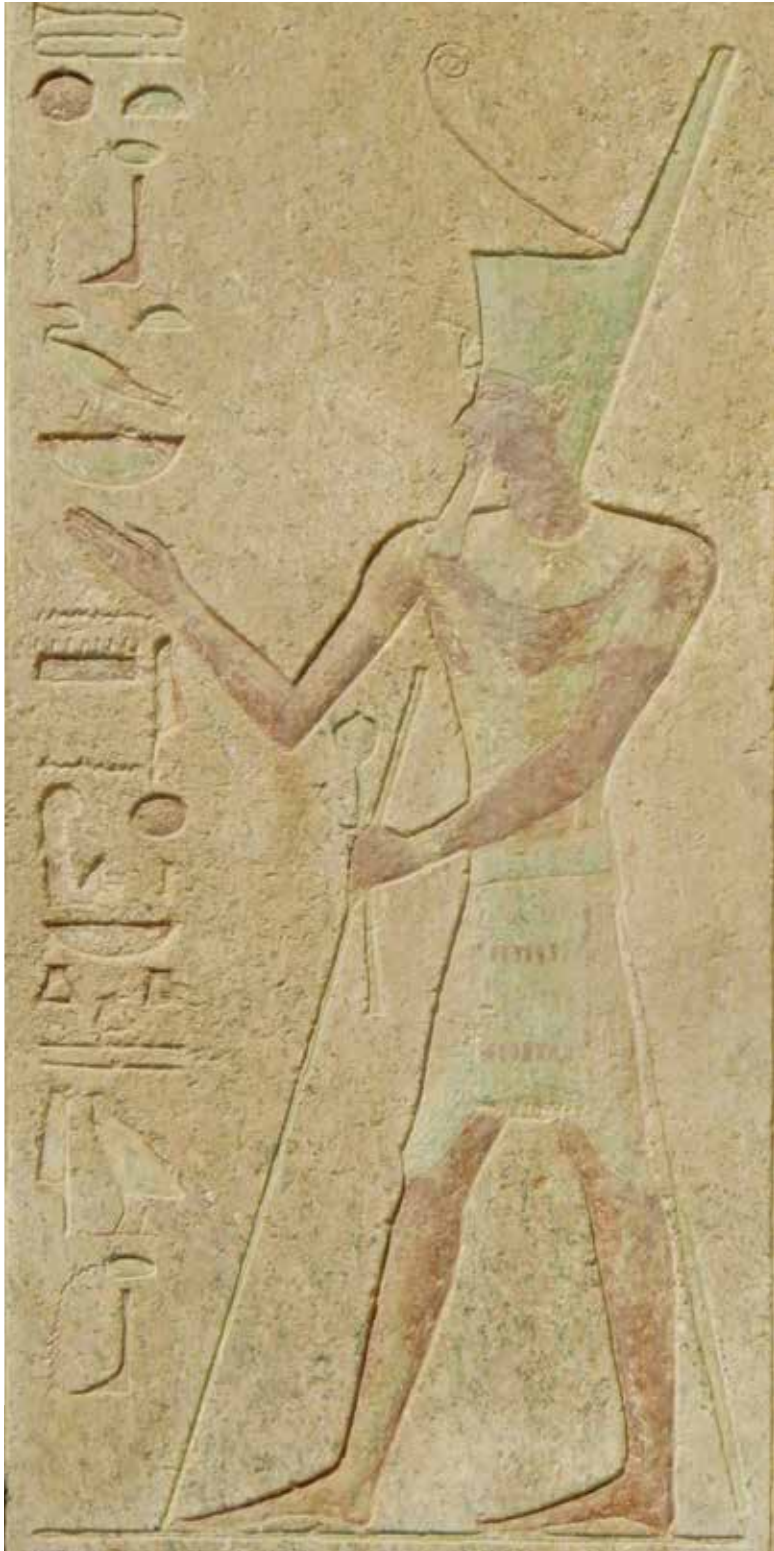
114 Cauville: *Théologie du temple*, 9ff, 76 etc.; Schwaller de Lubicz: *Temple de l’homme*, III, 133, 266 etc. Further ref.: Cauville: *Chapelles osi-*

*riennes*, 2, 199 etc., Cauville: *Théologie du temple*; Kurth: *Treffpunkt*, 31ff, 127ff

115 First Hypostyle Hall, West Wall, middle doorway. R. David, *Ritual*, 27 left column.

116 Kurth: *Treffpunkt*, 108.





*Left page, Fig. 52 and 53: Deir el-Bahari, southern (Upper Egypt, white crown) and northern (Lower Egypt, red crown) door jambs of sanctuary.*

*Fig. 54: Sema-tawy performed by androgynous Nile spirits. Abu Simbel.*

*Fig. 55: Column with lotus symbol Medinet Habu, south wing.*

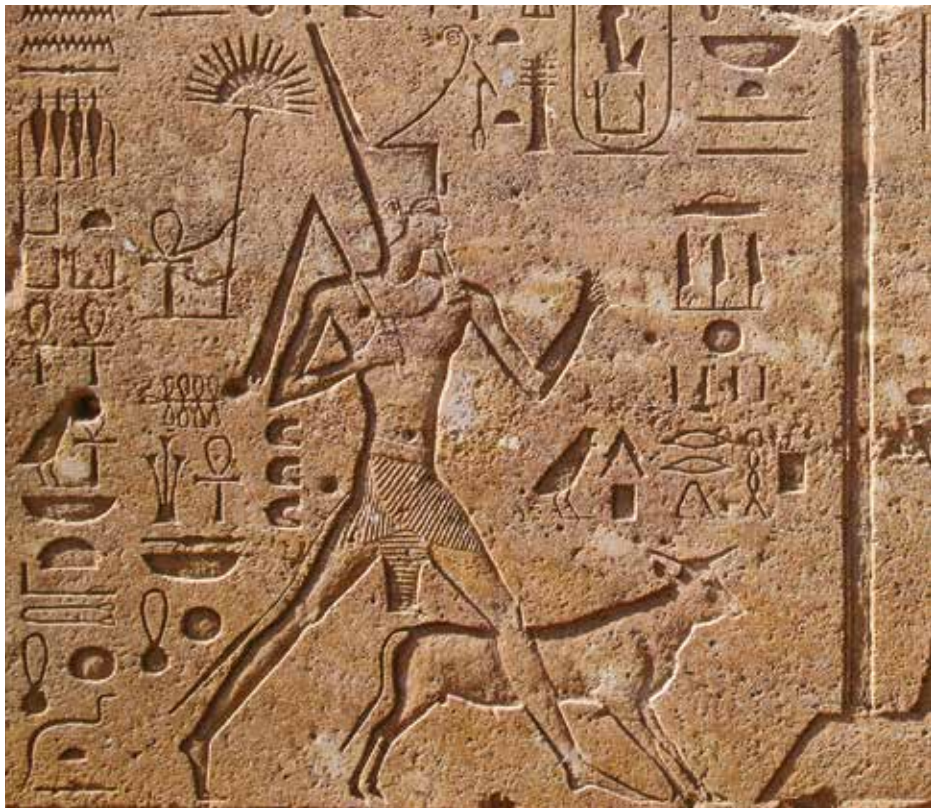
*Fig. 56: Column with papyrus symbol, Medinet Habu, north wing.*







**Fig. 57:** Queen Hatshepsut with Upper Egyptian crown performing ritual run with young bull. Karnak, Chapelle Rouge, OAM.



**Fig. 58:** Queen Hatshepsut with Lower Egyptian crown performing ritual run with young bull. Karnak, Chapelle rouge, OAM.

opposite movement. With each hall the space widened, in the courtyard the ceiling opened, and by passing through the gate of the double pylon towers, he entered the outer world. A good example illustrating this moment is to be observed on the Red Chapel in Karnak, where the God meets the persons who enter, always turning his back to the inner temple.<sup>117</sup> Considering the symbolic correspondence of the innermost chamber with the source of the Nile, the god then followed the flow of the river fertilizing the country. When Hathor left her temple in Dandara in April to travel upstream and meet Horus for the great festival of Edfu in the harvesting month of *khenti-khet*, the two directions were united. The same order can be found in royal tombs in Thebes.<sup>118</sup> This processional cycle corresponded to the *sema tawy* process and was accompanied by its symbols. It has already been mentioned that the Egyptians used to look upstream for their spacial orientation, thus the arrangement of the symbols on either side followed this usage, papyrus and other Lower Egyptian symbols appearing to the right, lotus and Upper Egyptian ones to the left, as might be seen in our illustrations. In 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty temples, Asian and African prisoners are included among these symbols as an additional feature (see figs. 93-96).

With the procession, the god is taking possession of his country and secures its prosperity. Likewise the king takes possession of his kingdom and unites its two parts in the ceremony of running from north to south and back as part of his coronation ceremony, during the *sed*-festival and whenever a temple was founded. Often the run is shown symmetrically with God Amun at the centre. The king then wears the white crown when running south, and the red one running north. This performance is also proof of his vigour and his ability to rule the country in the right balance of its components. On certain occasions he (or she, as in Queen Hatshepsut's case, though she was generally depicted as a male king) is seen running along with a young bull.



**Fig. 59:** King Ramses III performing ritual Sema-tawi run with Upper and Lower Egyptian crowns, respectively. Thebes, Temple of Medinet Habu.

<sup>117</sup> Lacau et al., 39-42, with mention of the *sema tawy* principle.

<sup>118</sup> E.g.: Tomb of Ramses VI, hall H. Piankoff, p.319.



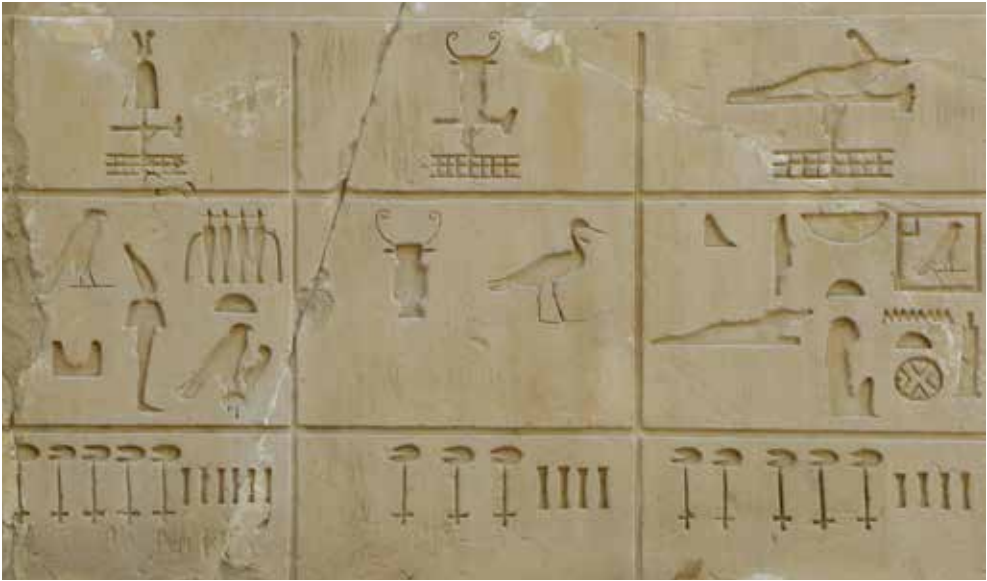


Fig. 60: Census list. Nomes of Abydos, Hu and Dandara. White Chapel of King Sesostris I, Karnak OAM

It is not surprising that in an agricultural civilization like the Egyptian one, cosmic processes are made visible through images of natural ones. Not only the temple as an image of the world and of Egypt rests on the divine forces that cause growth and decay, as personalized in the imagery of its lower registers, but also in the small chapels where the god’s barge takes a rest during processions. As these buildings were visible for the ordinary people, they were displaying the prosperity of the country in a more factual way by a census of people, cattle and agricultural products.

Although in Edfu Osiris is not the main god of the temple, he cannot be separated from Horus and from his counterpart Seth. He is always present as the cause of Egypt’s twofold nature, dying and resurrecting and thereby giving fertility to the country. In the solemn celebration of the Mysteries of Osiris during a fortnight in the first month of sowing, the cycle of death and renewal was enacted by modelling effigies of the Osiris mummy from a mixture of earth and wheat. The figures were watered, after ten days the sprouts appeared

and Osiris came to life again. Finally, the figures were ritually buried, another agricultural year began.<sup>119</sup>

Beginning with the motto of this book, we have frequently encountered this Egyptian habit of interaction between visible material reality and the underlying hidden spiritual forces. The country was not understood as just a geographic coincidence, but as a matrix for divine creative working, and the same is true for the temple. There is scarcely any part of it that does not hint at the interaction of Horus and Seth and the participation of Osiris, Isis, Nephthys, Anubis and all the other gods ensuring the life of the country. The *sema tawy* principle is omnipresent. The very journey of the god in his procession is like breathing, going in and out, following the course of the symbolic river Nile. The king is going the same way when performing his daily visit to the god.<sup>120</sup> The idea also shines up in two inscriptions that accompany Nile-spirits on the Pylon of the temple of Isis at Philae. One of them is called “*The one travelling upstream from Heliopolis to Nubia*”, another one is “*He who comes back downstream, the Nile being behind him*”.<sup>121</sup>

Thus in the architecture of the temple and its decorative array, the idea of *sema tawy* has become stone. The Egyptians must have felt that *sema tawy*, being a general principle, also corresponded to human breathing, since the hieroglyph sign for the lungs and trachea does also mean “*unite*” and constitutes the central part of hundreds of *sema tawy* images. The spaces on both sides of the temple axis are not just representing east and west, but Upper and Lower Egypt as well. The gods, animals and plants of the lower part of the walls are not only an expression of natural fertility, but they also represent cosmic polarity, as well as the qualities of narrowing and widening that equally mark the spacial sequence of the rooms and the rhythm of human respiration. As has already repeatedly been mentioned, the middle axis of the temple symbolically equals the Nile with its source in the innermost chamber, regardless of the temple’s geographic orientation. We have to recall

that spacial orientation of the Egyptians used to be southwards, upstream. Looking south can also mean looking forward, inside or up. The head is south – when Isis and Nephthys are bewailing the dead Osiris, Nephthys is always on the side of his head, being associated with Seth in the south. The king of Upper Egypt is always mentioned first. From the god in Philae could therefore be said “*He who comes back downstream, the Nile being behind him*”.

The Greek hermetic writer Stobaeus compares the earth with a human whose head is in the south, the modern hermetic writer Schwaller de Lubicz sees a human shape in the groundplan of Luxor Temple, its head in the Holy of Holies in the south.<sup>122</sup> Looking forward, south that is, west is at our right hand side, which even for ancient Egyptians was the “*right*” side. Death made them “*enter into the beautiful West*”, with a promise of resurrection into another life by the power of Khepri, the mysterious scarab of renewal.<sup>123</sup> But we must not be confused when the distribution of the *sema tawy* symbols sometimes follows the intrinsic geography of the temple,<sup>124</sup> and in other instances the true geographic situation. Medinet Habu temple being orientated to the west has lotus and other Upper Egyptian symbols on its southern (left) side, whereas in the big main temple of Amun at Karnak looking east, the two blason pillars in front of the sanctuary display lotus to the right, here being true south.

Not always have these principles been strictly observed. In the Osirian temple of King Sethos I at Abydos, completed by his son Ramses II, there must have been ritual considerations for picturing Upper Egyptian nome-spirits on the northern walls, but holding papyrus stalks, and on the south side Lower Egyptian ones with lotus flowers. Elsewhere in the temple and on the two high *djet*-pillars embracing the central hall, the regular north-south distribution is again applied (figs. 80). Thus in spite of their seemingly uniform structure Egyptian temples show many individual features when details and inscriptions are considered.



Fig. 61: Effigy of Osiris moulded of Nile mud and corn, used in mystery rituals. Tutankhamun treasure, CM

119 The production of such a corn Osiris and the accompanying ritual is documented in the late Egyptian temple in Esna (See Chassinat Le Mystère d’Osiris).

120 Assman sees in this a sacramental parallel to the Ascension : [the

Priest] opens the wings of the door of the heavens in Karnak and beholds the mysteries of the Land of Light (Assmann Initiation, 347).

121 Junker, Pylon, 70, fig. 35.

122 Schwaller de Lubicz: Temple de L’Homme, t. 2, pl. XV etc.

123 S. Cauville then mentions a “création continue”, a continuing creation (Théologie du Temple, 69).

124 Such an “intrinsic” orientation is also found in depictions (cfr. Roberson: Awakening, 9f).





**Fig. 68:** Hebsed relief of King Amenhotep III, Karnak, Open Air Museum

### 5. The Religious and Political level – the Sed-Festival

Hieroglyphic texts are quite explicit in certain topics, but extremely tacit when it comes to certain ritual details of the king’s consecration, coronation and of the sed-festival, albeit these belong to the most important elements of kingdom. The *sed*-festival could even be called a *sema tawy* festival, and it shall now be considered first. It is omnipresent with hundreds of its hieroglyphic signs on temple walls,<sup>135</sup> and is closely connected to royal consecration; nevertheless its full reality can still not be grasped, since the lack of detailed information comprises both events. The dismay of egyptologists is thus resumed by R.A. Grover: *The sed-festival is one of the most mysterious of the ancient Egyptian festivals and it is not known exactly what rituals happened during this festival, how it evolved, or what its purpose was. We have no texts describing the sed-festival, but from the earliest dynasties we have texts mentioning*

*that sed-festivals were celebrated. The fragmentary visual data we have comes from different dynasties, and it is not clear if we even have depicted all the main events of the festival, nor are we certain that archaeologists and scholars have correctly reconstructed the reliefs and put together the sequence of events and rituals.*<sup>136</sup>

The central scope of it must have been the rejuvenation of the king and the renewal of the kingdom. When in the temple of Philae, Isis is presenting a *Heb-sed* sign to king Ptolemy Philadelphus, he replies: *“I am given the kingdom by Isis, the Provider of Life”*.<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, the festival is closely connected to other important events like the foundation of a temple or the erection of Obelisks. Perhaps it is precisely its great religious importance that put the veil of secrecy around its most important parts.

Its real significance can thus only be approached through fragments of information still extant, and this



**Fig. 69:** Ra Presenting Hebsed-signs to King Seti I. Karnak, Hypostyle Hall, inner north wall.

**Fig. 70:** Hieroglyphic signs depicting Heb-sed buildings. “White Chapel” of King Sesotris I. Karnak OAM

is what I am now going to try. On several occasions during the prolonged ritual, the king was given a promise of never ending reign, accompanied by palm rib counting-rods and *Heb-sed* symbols. This eternity can not have been meant to only refer to the actual individual king, but would include the ancestors as well as the individuals following him in the continued sequence of kings that constituted the ever-lasting kingdom founded by Horus when his kingship was confirmed by the gods. The *Heb-sed* therefore could have been meant to introduce and confirm the ruling king as a member of this venerable chain. We find this idea confirmed in the veneration of the royal ancestors in the daily offering ritual and during the coronation ceremonies. The continuity was carefully documented in temple archives, and to it we owe the monumental list in the temple of Abydos, where King Sethos I and Prince Ramses his son are reciting the names of all the preceding kings from a papyrus scroll (fig. 129). Another argument for this eternalizing function is provided by



<sup>135</sup> For a list, see H. Sourousian, *Inventaire, und Hornung/Staehelin, Neue Forschungen*, 13-37.

<sup>136</sup> FR.A.Grover: *Queenship*, p.4

<sup>137</sup> Junker, *Pylon*, 76 and fig.39.





texts mentioning *Heb-sed*-festivals celebrated by the Sun-God: “*mayest thou celebrate jubilee festivals like Re*”.<sup>138</sup> “*Heb-sed*” translated by “*jubilee*” makes no sense in connection with Ra, but stresses the transcendent eternal character of the ceremony.

At first sight the activity of Horus and Seth (or Thoth) in the *sema tawy* images could appear as one of tightening the knot once and forever. But the sign of the lungs in the middle tells us otherwise. It hints at the dynamic character of *sema tawy*, as the king has to constantly maintain the wholeness of the country. This has to be done in a respiratory process of keeping the balance of compression and release, marked by the lung-and-trachea hieroglyph and by the character of the two gods. Erik Hornung refers to the *sed*-festival as one of “*continued regeneration*”, the “*icon of renewal*”, and he compares this regenerative process to the daily course of the sun as the Egyptian priests used to do.<sup>139</sup> But regeneration presupposes also decay, and the *sed* festival may also be understood as a counteraction against the retarding action of Seth. The festival is also understood as an opportunity for the king to give proof of his strength by a sportive run, as it is known from archaic tribal rituals. Such a background might have survived from predynastic times, but in the elaborate religious culture of the Old Kingdom, accents had shifted into a more subtle understanding.

Throughout Egyptian history and all over the country the *sed*-festival is mentioned on temple walls, accompanied by countless *sed*-festival symbols. Much has been written about the thirty-year period mentioned on the rosetta stela, but obviously the number must not be understood as a concrete rule, as it does not fit into any periodicity of known festival dates.<sup>140</sup> In a coronation text of queen Hatshepsut, Amun seems to fix the dates of *sed*-festivals ad hoc: “*His Majesty spoke, fixed her titulary and repeated the sed-festivals for her*”.<sup>141</sup> When dates of *sed*-festivals are documented, scholars even doubt in many cases that the events have actually taken place. In this context, Erik Hornung und Elisabeth Staehelin therefore speak about

“*virtual*” *sed*-festivals and see ritual reasons as one of several possible explanations for this camouflage.<sup>142</sup> The connection of certain scenes of the king’s awakening with the *sed*-festival will therefore be discussed in this chapter. Anyhow it seems evident that a god wishing the king “*innumerable*” *sed*-festivals does not always refer to real festivals, but to the continuity of kingship in the flowing stream of time, similar to the macrocosmic respiratory aspect of *sema tawy* that guarantees the millennial flow of Egyptian civilization. The first notice of *Heb-sed* comes from a miniature early dynastic ivory tablet, and a little later we have the concrete documentary of King Djoser’s precinct in Saqqara that shall be examined in a special chapter. Next come the solar sanctuaries of King Ne-user-Re in Abu Gurob and of King Sahu-Re in Abusir, the texts and depictions of the 18<sup>th</sup>-dynasty tomb of the Vizier Kheruef in Thebes and further more or less fragmentary testimonies throughout the country up to the Late Period, the most complete being those on a temple gate of King Osorkon II at Bubastis in the Nile Delta.<sup>143</sup> Fragments from destroyed causeways and pyramid temples lead us to assume that *sed*-festival ceremonies have been enacted at all the pyramids. This seems surprising, as the *sed*-festival, being a ritual of renewal for the living king, appears contrary to the mortuary destination of the pyramids.

However, recent excavations of the German Archaeological Institute near the Dahshur Pyramids have revived the old discussion about the pyramids’ ritual use apart from its mortuary destination. Strabo’s notice of a revolving stone at the entrance of the Great Pyramid<sup>144</sup> having been discarded as noncredible, the question still remained. The rejuvenating *sed*-festival recalled the earthly aspect of the eternal renewal of the Sun. When Re-Horakhty addresses King Sethos I, he says: “*he renews births again like the sun’s disk in the sky..., the Lady of Writing inaugurates for him, thou being renewed with life, prosperity and health*”. Seshat, the Lady of Writing, then adds: “*Behold, it is commanded to record his kingship, my hand writing it, namely his great lifetime...with many millions of jubilee festi-*

*vals...*”<sup>145</sup> A virtual sequence of *sed*-festivals could thus become the measure of the aforementioned eternal kingdom. The gods are promising the king “*Millions of sed-festivals, ten millions of years, hundred thousands of months, thousands of days*”.<sup>146</sup> Jean-Philippe Lauer had already envisaged the possible idea of *sed*-festivals being celebrated for the Ka, the King’s Vital Soul.<sup>147</sup> The *Heb-sed* (or *sed*-festival)<sup>148</sup> would then have been an event transcending the border of the other world. To understand such a relation, we have to recall how near this other world was to the ancient Egyptian imagination, and how permeable the border appeared between material and spiritual reality – a permeability we have already remarked at the beginning of this book when speaking of the Osiris myth. Osiris having died, and resurrecting as Horus can be understood as a transition across two modes of existence usually called “*life*” and “*death*”. Should a human succeed in passing this threshold and return into his earthly existence, he would have seen the *duat* and thereby acquired a new level of consciousness. It seems that this experience

Left page, Fig. 71: King Amenhotep III in heb-sed attire. Tomb of Kheruef, TT192.

138 Abydos, temple of Sethos I, chapel of Sethos (R. David, Guide, 90).

139 Hornung/Staehelin, Neue Studien, Epilog, 97.

140 There is neither an explanation for the 30-year-period, nor do known festival dates follow this rule. Furthermore it is not clear whether this period was calculated from the coronation or even from the birth of the incumbent, regarding Hatshepsut and Thotmes III. Thus several scholars totally reject it: Bleeker, Festivals 114; Grover, Queenship, and Hornung/Staehelin, Neue Studien, passim.

143 There the *sema tawy* connection is most obviously proven. In that the lower-egyptian aspect is to be found to the north and the upper-egyptian one to the south of the portal gate, the public events are on the outside, the occult ones inside, and the “private”

ones in the passageway (Uphill, Sed-festival Rites, 366).

142 Hornung/Staehelin: Neue Studien, 10. On the other hand Ramses III says he has restored *sed*-festival structure of earlier kings in Memphis – that seems to refer to real festivals (Erichsen, Papyrus Harris; Uphill, Sed-Festivals, 369).

144 Strabo, Geographica, Book 17,31.

145 R. David, Guide, 92; cfr. the Purification text, p.43.

146 Hornung/Staehelin: Neue Studien, 44ff with further references.

147 Lauer: Histoire monumentale, 144f. It should be born in mind that it wasn’t the life force Ka, but the Ba soul which began the journey to the other world.

148 Heb being the ancient Egyptian term for festival.



is meant when Egyptian texts use the expression “*to become an akh*”, and when the Pyramid texts speaks of the king as of “*one who went [as Osiris] and returned as Horus*”.<sup>149</sup> An event in the centre of the *sed*-festival, usually called the “*scene of the lion-bed*” obviously concerns such an osirian near-death experience as part of the royal initiation. I shall return to this question later.<sup>150</sup> It has repeatedly been remarked that the *sed*-festival is so closely related to the concept of an

eternal kingdom and its strengthening and renewal, that in many instances it is impossible to clearly distinguish between its earthly and otherworldly levels. This aspect of human relation to the other world will be considered in a special chapter. Let us first look more closely at the various parts of the *sed*-festival. Researchers do not agree on the arrangement and sequence of the different parts, but the following version has a fair degree of plausibility.

Possible Phases of the sed-festival – an overview:

- Extensive preparations, Construction of special venues
- Appointment of a priest or Vezir to direct the festival
- “*Lighting the [offering] flame*”
- Solemn procession of arriving participants
- Purification of the king
- Erection of the Djed-Pillar
- Blessing the four cardinal points
- The “*Secret Ritual in the tomb*” (lions-bed scene)
- Coronation with White and Red crown
- Ritual Run – Unification of the Two Lands
- Procession visiting the chapels of the gods of Egypt
- Offering the products of the country

(The sequence of the scenes can not be reliably ascertained)

Announcement of the Festival, and Preparations

As the religious importance of the *sed*-festival required extensive preparations, it was solemnly announced a year before its start. A Vezir or High Priest was appointed to direct the event. During *sed*-festivals of Amenhotep III the Vezir Kheruef held this office, as we know from texts in his Theban tomb.<sup>151</sup> Food was brought from all over the country for the public parts and for offerings,<sup>152</sup> and the construction of special buildings was begun. We even read of participants coming from the Oases and other distant parts of the country, and of the complaint of a Babylonian king who had not been invited to a certain *Heb-sed*. When all the requirements had been fulfilled, the festival proper could begin. It started early in the morning, when the ritual of “*Lighting the Flame*” took place. Presumably this was a fire for offerings and purification to ritually prepare the festival area, its buildings and the throne. Now the golden images of the gods, the instruments, crowns and insignia were brought by boats on the Nile.

Participants and Venues

The festival extending over several days or even weeks, public events alternated with other ones in the royal palace or in special buildings where only a restricted circle of participants was admitted. While we have to think of the public parts as of crowded popular festivities, the ceremonial ones must have been of an intimate character with a smaller number of dignitaries attending, one part even being limited to the king and a high priest. An important role was played by the queen and the princes and princesses of the royal family. When the royals with their retinue and official participants arrived or exited in a solemn procession, standards were carried on high poles with emblems of gods and an unidentified object which might represent the mummified placenta of the king, understood as a token of rebirth.<sup>153</sup>



Fig. 72: Festival procession. Kom Ombo temple.

THE LEVELS OF SEMA-TAWY   THE SED-FESTIVAL			72   73
149 PT 260 (Unas 176, transl. by J.P.Allen: Pyramid Texts, S.46.). Cfr. J.Naydler: Shamanic Wisdom, 59.	151 TT 192. For texts, see Wente, Edward F., in: UCOIP 102, Chicago 1980, 30-78.	153 See also: M.Murray, in: Ancient Egypt 3/1930, and W. Schad: Die verlorene Hälfte des Menschen. Stuttgart 2008	
150 This motif should not be confused with another kind of lion-bed occurrence: cfr. H.Altenmüller and Vasiljević, AO 2000, pp.305ff and 104f.	152 In the “lost city”, excavated 2020/21 in Luxor, a pot with meat labeled for a sed-festival was discovered		



# SED-FESTIVAL

# AND SEMA TAWY IN THE PRECINCT OF KING DJOSER AT SAQQARA

The wide area on the margin of the Desert plateau west of the ancient capital of Memphis was sacred to Sokaris,<sup>173</sup> a god closely connected with Osiris, but also to Ptah, the god inspiring crafts and any shaping of matter into form.

In Saqqara, the high priest Imhotep, master builder of king Djoser, erected one of the most amazing monuments of Egypt, the first one to be built of regular stone masonry. It was a step pyramid inmidst of a huge walled rectangle of 300 by 700 meters; its divers structures constituted what may be called a stage for a *sed*-festival. It is noteworthy however that most of the buildings did not have rooms inside, being filled up with rubble behind their splendid outer facade. It was an undertaking without precedent. For the wall with its height of about ten meters and the buildings, more than 100 000 precisely hewn rectangular stone blocks had to be prepared, brought over from the quarries of Tura on the other side of the Nile, and fitted together. A stupendous project, considering the workforce, skill and logistics required, with a minimum of previous experience, not to speak of the layout with all its symbolic relations. Never before a stone building of this dimension had been achieved in Egypt. It is true, the pyramid was built in several stages, and its smaller blocks do not show the accuracy of workmanship seen in the walls and surrounding structures. A number of structural elements had been taken over from previous wooden buildings, and Imhotep seems to have developed forms and technique during the progress of work. Many details give testimony of his genius, and later generations held him in reverence as a god and healer, and he was equalled to Asklepius in the Greco-Roman period.

The “*White Walls*” would become a synonym for Memphis and the cult of the god Ptah, and as the area is situated on the border between Upper and Lower Egypt, it was called *mekhat tawy* or else *anch tawy*, the *scales* or the *life* of the two Lands.

This unique precinct of King Djoser comprises two distinct architectonical features: A small number of buildings, destined for ceremonial use, have “*real*”

rooms whereas all the remaining structures do not enclose any space, albeit showing elaborately executed outside walls, as we can observe in the bird’s view of figure 97.



Fig. 97: Gateway of Djoser precinct.

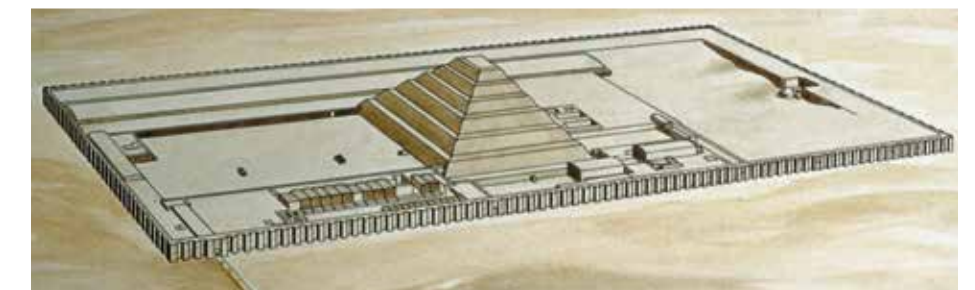


Fig. 98: Model of Saqqara Djoser Precinct.