

Temple Symbolism

It has long been recognised that Egyptian temples (*fig. 1*) have a 'cosmographic' function (de Roche-monteix 1887). They mimic and record the structure of the world. As this recording is not direct, but is filtered by conventions of representation, classification and symbolism, and may frequently be expressed in terms of myth, the study of temples should yield results for our understanding of Egyptian ideology in general. The particular relevance of cosmography to a temple's function as the god's dwelling and cult centre is clear: the god's dwelling is a 'world', and to describe the 'world' is to praise it, so that the temple unites the two functions in a single symbol. Only relatively recently have the implications of this idea been examined in any detail. Cosmography has been studied in the context of the solar cult, and it has been shown to have a crucial place in hymns to the sun-god that form part of the temple liturgy (Assmann 1969). A particularly important text is in a position in the temple where it has a direct link with the visible path of the sun and its reflection in the architecture of the building (Assmann 1970; Brunner 1970). Only rarely can the connection between structure and meaning be so well observed in a text, as the normal formulae for temple decoration do not include space for texts of any great length. Reliefs, whose textual content is mostly limited to brief speeches and scene titles, generally fill almost the entire wall area of a temple.

Despite the absence of long texts, both the short formulae and representational and iconographic features of the reliefs can give us a number of insights into the layout of the decoration and into features of content that are not expressed directly. The schemes that designers use for this purpose are elaborate, and show a desire to determine the form of the whole according to numerous overlapping criteria. In any particular context the reliefs will be an accommodation of the relevant subject matter to the general schemes, whose function might be likened to a rhyme pattern or an acrostic — which is devised to carry meaning — in poetry. Apart from their purely formal characteristics, the schemes may be exploited for the expression of

values. On the level of the 'acrostic' they may proclaim the king's titulary and extol his role in the cult over an entire wall many yards high (Winter 1968, part 1); they may also be seen to embody distinctions and boundaries in classification. In view of the highly formalised nature of the system, it would be tempting to suggest that it reflected in some way the rigid hierarchies of Egyptian society, and I shall return to this question at the end.

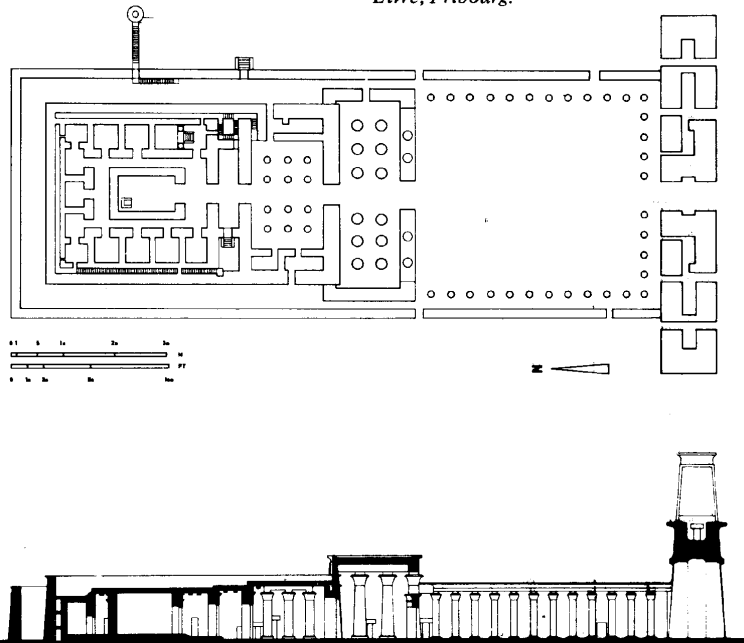
The following description applies chiefly to temples of the Graeco-Roman period. These are the best preserved, and the ones which exhibit the highest degree of systematisation. Their form shows almost no foreign influence, and they do not depart radically from earlier schemes, so that what is said is mostly valid for earlier buildings also. Most other important temples date to the New Kingdom.

The articulation of the architectural symbolism of a temple exploits both the horizontal and the vertical dimension; the primary function of both is to set the temple apart from the outside world. Reading along a ground plan from the outside in, the most massive element in the structure is the enclosure wall, of which the most significant part is the entrance wall or pylon (which may alternatively be set within the enclosure wall; *fig. 2* [includes the pylon but lacks the enclosure wall.]) This is decorated primarily with scenes showing the destruction of enemies (*fig. 3*), symbolic of the maintenance of order within the temple — and by analogy the world — against the forces of disorder. Subsidiary decorative motifs on pylons make them into one of many representations of the sun's path (Derchain 1966). In section, the outermost parts of a temple, which alone were accessible to more than the priests (and then probably at important festivals only) are at the lowest level, while inner areas have a raised floor. The ceiling or wall height is also lowered progressively, so that the sanctuary may be seen to be contained within the framework of the outer walls; this implies that it is completely protected. The raised floor level is also a mythological allusion, referring to the commonest version of a creation myth, in which the creator god emerges on, or in the form of, a primeval mound in the



Fig. 1. View of the temple of Edfu from the top of the entrance pylon; the first court and hypostyle hall are in the foreground. 3rd-1st century B.C. From E. Chassinat, *Le temple d'Edfou 9* (Mem. Miss. arch. fr. 26; Cairo: I.F.A.O. 1929) pl. 10. Courtesy I.F.A.O.

Fig. 2. Plan and section of the temple of Edfu. The theoretical orientation is not north-south, as shown, but east-west, and is fixed by the course of the Nile near the temple. 3rd-1st century B.C. From J.-L. de Cenival, *Living architecture: Egyptian* (London: Oldbourne 1964) 148. Courtesy Office du Livre, Fribourg.



watery chaos. The feature might well carry a variety of local meanings in addition to this general one. This possibility is suggested by the use of varying types of capitals on the columns in different temples, as the columns carry much of the cosmographic meaning.

Within single walls the vertical dimension appears to be the most important ordering principle. Linear arrangements can also be discerned – the ritual actions recorded and dress depicted, for example, may be comparable on opposite walls of a room – but so far no more general rules have been identified; this is not to say that they do not exist. Apart from the vertical features of the acrostic type, there is a more embracing order with the following divisions (reading from the bottom up): (1) base area, (2) main area, (3) frieze, architraves and ceiling.

(1) The base area contains symbolic representations of marsh land, sets of figures bringing offerings of food or symbolic gifts towards the interior of the temple (fig. 4), or a mixture of the two. There may also be formalised groupings of the emblems of major deities. The area may be absent in the inner parts of a temple, but is normally found in most rooms of Graeco-Roman temples. The scale of the figures is considerably smaller than that found in the main area.

(2) The main area consists of up to four, occasionally five, registers of scenes (see the background of fig. 5), with an indeterminate number of scenes in each register. There are only very slight

discriminations between the scenes in the area. Each scene almost always consists of a figure of the king offering or performing a similar cult action for a deity or deities, or of deities acting on behalf of the king. The figures of the king face towards the sanctuary or the axis of the temple, and the deities, who are held to reside in the temple, face out from the sanctuary. The scenes are composed into regular squares or rectangles that do not reflect any concrete setting, but act more or less as forms whose blanks are filled in with features appropriate to a particular god, ritual action, or context.

The schemata are far more rigid than those used in Egyptian art as a whole; this reflects both content and a deliberate formalisation.

(3) The frieze above the main area consists typically of repetitive emblematic groupings (on the columns in fig. 5), or of long series of deities, often shown in a squatting position that may be compared to the hieroglyph for 'god', adored by a single figure of the king. The scale here is minuscule in comparison with the main area, and the figures are difficult to see from the ground and their captions illegible. The architraves, which

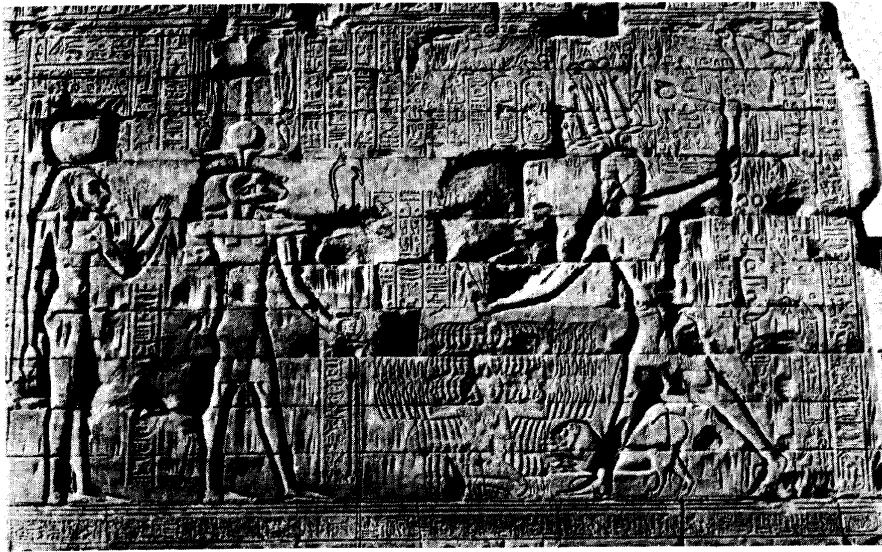


Fig. 3. Scene of the king massacring enemies before the god Khnum, on the southern outside wall of the temple of Esna. Such scenes are normally placed on pylons, but here the pylon was never built. 1st century A.D.

Fig. 4. Pair of offering bearers (fecundity figures), from a series in the first hypostyle hall of the temple of Ramesses II at Abydos. c. 1290 B.C.



are at the same level or higher, are comparable in scale and decoration or may contain astronomical scenes. Above them, the ceiling may have a pattern of stars or astronomical scenes, in particular representations of the sky-goddess Nut. There is also often a series of winged sun disks down the axis of the temple, marking the sun's theoretical passage through it. The upper areas are often absent, and the only location where they are regularly found is the columned or hypostyle hall that normally comes at the beginning of the inner temple structure (fig. 5), and is taller than the sanctuary. Further in there is no space, literal or symbolic, for these features. Both the base area and the frieze act to some extent as lines, defining the main area, and this function is rendered visible by their markedly linear character. In the Graeco-Roman period there is an additional horizontal band of inscription between the main and base areas that reinforces the demarcation. The inscription mostly records the building of the

temple, evidently implying that the area above it is the temple proper.

The hypostyle hall exhibits the greatest condensation of symbolism. Apart from cosmographic features on its walls and ceiling, the capitals of the columns locate it within the horizontally ordered cosmographic scheme. The commonest designs for capitals are papyrus umbels and lotus flowers, so that by implication the columns themselves are the stems of aquatic plants (the shape of the column may mimic a plant in several ways). Apart from allusions to the origin of stone architecture in flimsier materials, this means that the hall is a symbolic primeval swamp, out of which the mound of the sanctuary emerges. We might use the analogy of renaissance architecture, and say that the columns are a 'giant' order within which are contained the smaller orders of the walls and of the individual scenes in each register. At this last level it can be shown that the design of scenes contains vestiges of cosmography which also act as a magical protection, and

delimit them with elements that allude to earth, lateral supports for the sky, and sky.

It can be seen that the three main areas of wall decoration share little of their subject matter, and the rigidity with which they are separated probably symbolises to some extent the setting apart of the ordered 'world' — the main area — from the threatening chaos that surrounds it. In this delimiting function the base area is particularly rich in associations and ambiguities, and it is possible to show that the differing representational features of the main and base areas (and probably of the frieze) form an ordered hierarchy, whose full spread is from the writing of a text, at the commonplace end, to the direct depiction of deities at the other extreme. Direct depiction also occurs at the commonplace end, which shows that the ordering of the elements is more important than the nature of each one for our understanding of the system.

The hierarchy has so far been studied in terms of temple decoration, but its rules evidently extend outside, and I shall mention possible connections below. I term an intermediate stage between the script and direct depiction the 'emblematic' mode of representation; this marks where an element, mostly of a high status, occurs out of context. The base area is particularly suitable for a study of its operation. Its material is mostly too low in the hierarchy to feature in a main area, but is shown in the normal mode because it is in its proper position. If, however, major deities are to be alluded to in the area, this is done emblematically, and they are so different in status from offering bearers that they may not mix with them even in emblematic form. A further motif is a monogram that reads 'adoration by all the subjects', which is also emblematic. This ranks below offering bearers and is incompatible with them, so that discriminations according to content (deity or subjects) may be observed within the emblematic mode. The original reason why emblematic figures are used in liminal contexts seems clear: as they are not full depictions they give the necessary information, but do not have the potentially dangerous character — for the user of the area or for the being shown — of direct representation. This semi-magical aspect, which shows that reliefs may be taken more literally than we can easily comprehend, shades off into the purely symbolic. The most obvious liminal context, a door, normally has emblematic decoration, sometimes with a hierarchy of emblematic types, and the same basic scheme is found virtually wherever a door is placed, in the outermost part of a temple or near the sanctuary.

Some emblematic compositions acquire a life of their own, and come to have a variety of meanings; the best known of these is probably the 'union of the two lands', in which two fecundity figures (fat offering bearers who belong in base areas) bind the heraldic plants of the two halves of the country, typically

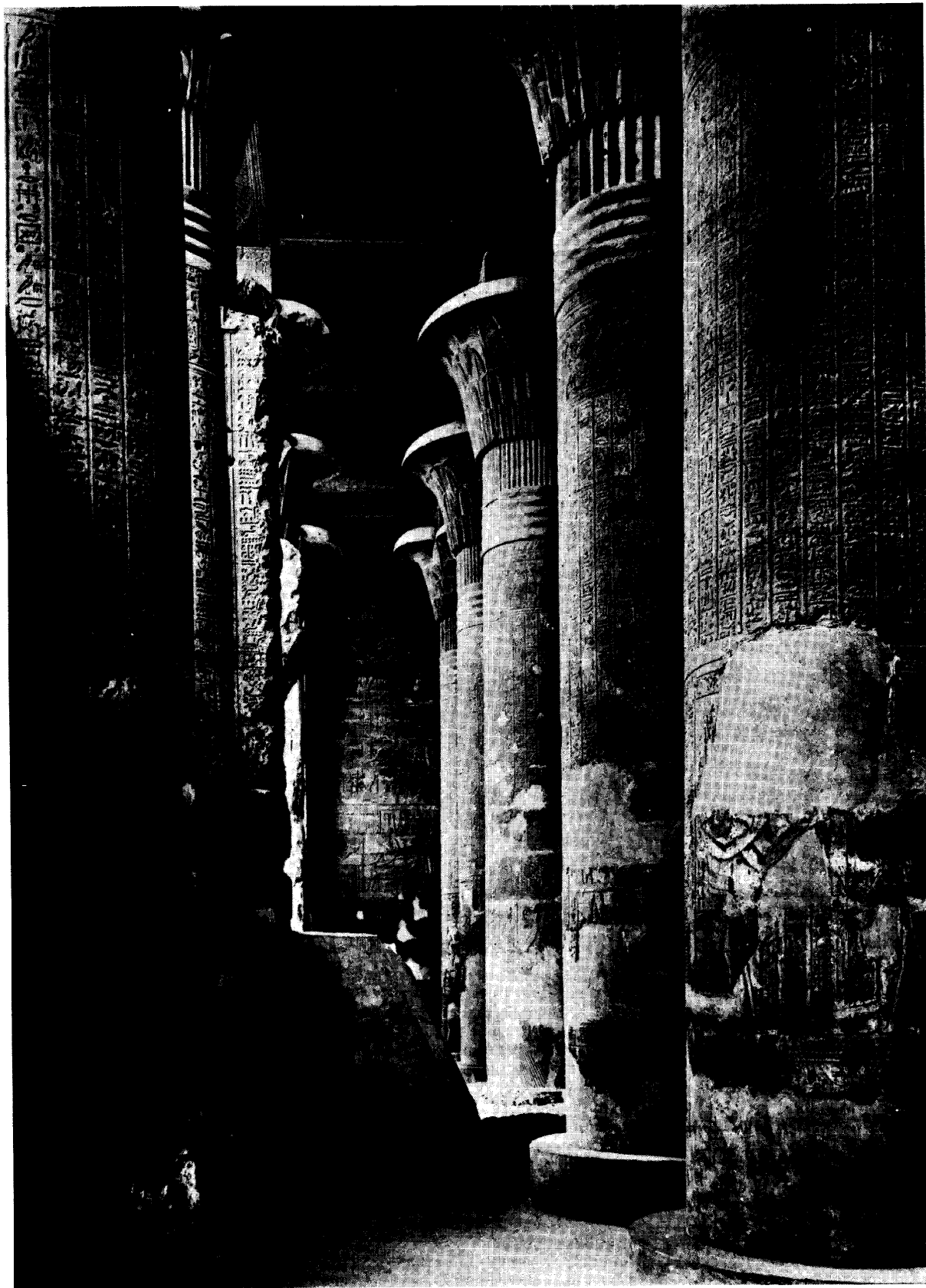


Fig. 5. View across the hypostyle hall of the temple of Esna. On the rear wall three of the four main registers of scenes are visible, and the frieze may be seen on the columns, above the large bands of inscription. Inscribed 1st-2nd century A.D. From G. Jéquier, Les temples ptolémaïques et romaines (L'Architecture et la Décoration dans l'ancienne Égypte; Paris: Albert Morancé 1924) pl. 74.

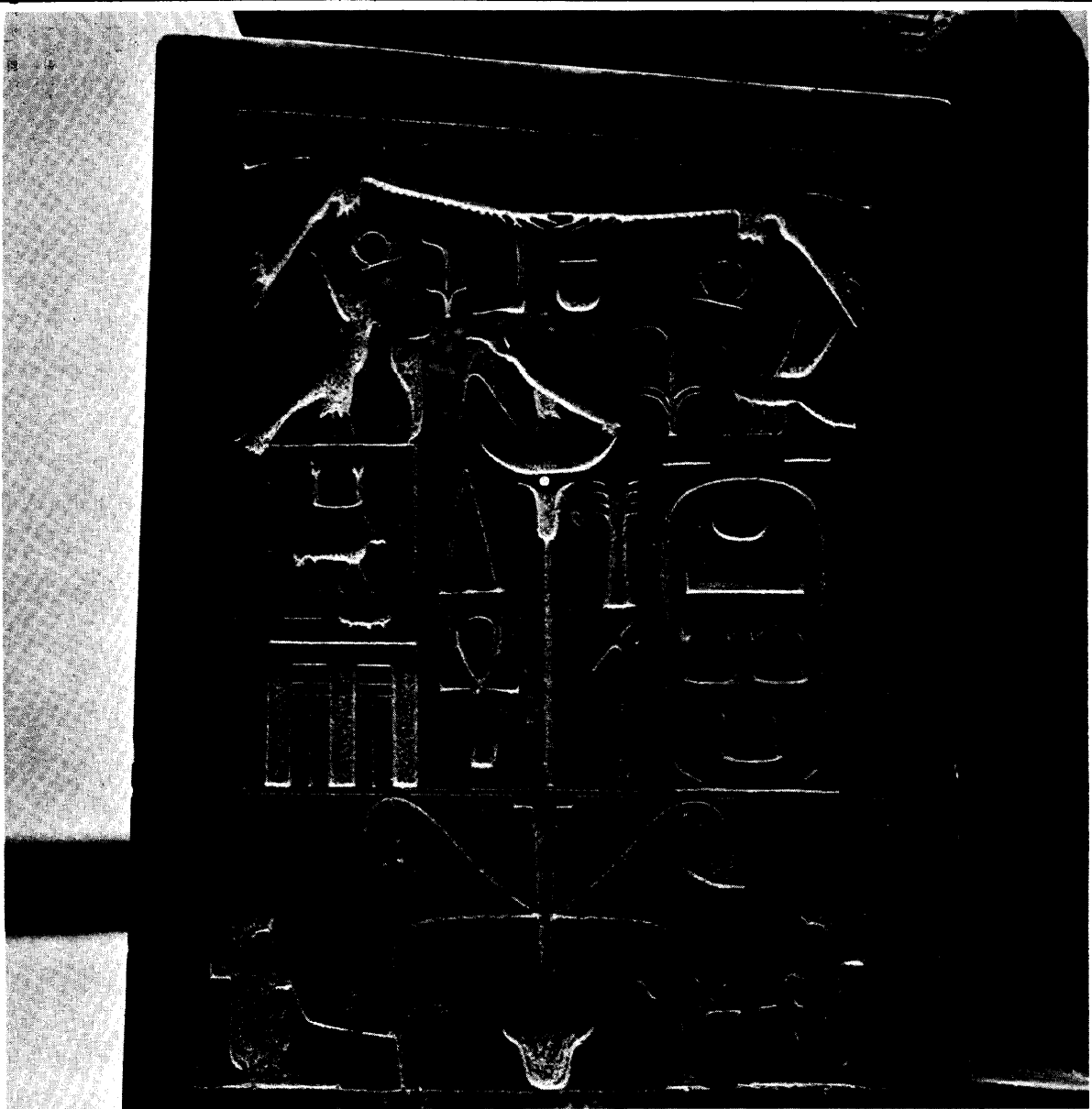


Fig. 6. Right side of the throne of a statue of Menkaure of the fourth dynasty. c. 2500 B.C., Boston, MFA 09.202. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts.

on the sides of royal thrones. In its earliest form this motif combines with another that is later found at a small scale in main relief areas, forming a counterpoint to the principal subject-matter. In *fig. 6*, the king's Horus name (in a rectangular frame) has opposite it a minuscule animal figure of a tutelary goddess of half the country, placed on a basket (hieroglyph for 'mistress') and a stem of a heraldic plant. The sign running diagonally across the basket is the hieroglyph for 'power', and is to be understood as being held out by her to the name. The group is glossed 'May she give life, stability and power'. In later reliefs this detail seems to be present simply as a complement to cartouches, and because it forms a neat space filler; it is also found in yet other contexts.

This last point entails an extension of the notion of modes of representation, as the hierarchies discussed so far in terms of temple relief also occur elsewhere, only outside temples their expression tends to be a complete exclusion of

some types of figure. Thus gods and the king are absent from most private tombs of earlier periods, and in the Old Kingdom the Horus name, the first and most prestigious element in the royal titulary, is not found in tombs. Private stelae, typically those of the Middle Kingdom from the centre of the Osiris cult at Abydos, show an intermediate form, in which king and god are shown as Horus name and cult image, and interact emblematically, as in *fig. 6* and on the front page. In most contexts distinctions of this sort can be observed to be eroded over time, and this erosion is part of the tendency of private individuals to annex royal privileges, which is termed the democratisation of religion. It can be shown that the implied classifications adapt to these changes, while the general system, as described above, survives to the end (temple designers were still using these schemes in the second century A.D.) The system embraces most types of relief, and may be likened to renaissance decorum, and it is from here that I

have borrowed the name to describe the Egyptian phenomenon. According to the renaissance theory the function and character of an area to be decorated determine what may be shown, and the decoration comments on the location. Stated thus, the principle is obvious enough, but both in Egypt and in the renaissance its implications are deeper. For the latter we have documentation of the thought expended on questions of decorum (cf. Gombrich 1972: 7-11), and it is reasonable to assume that there was similar thought in Egypt.

In conclusion, it may be worth considering one or two more general and speculative aspects of the system described. If temples are representations of the world, they show it in a highly stylised manner, and the conventions intensify greatly the rigidities and abstractions of Egyptian 'secular' art. The near-total absence of landscape in Egyptian art should not be thought to be distinctive, as it is a characteristic found in a number of other cultures, but this is

not true to the same extent of the chequerboard arrangement of scenes and the strict hierarchies of temple decoration (significantly, some of these features are absent from the base area and the frieze). If these are an ideal, and reflect the desired order of the world, we might interpret the implications on two speculative levels. On a psychological plane it could be argued that the insistence on the maintenance of order implied anxiety over its security, and this could be linked with the Egyptian view that order is constantly threatened and needs continual reaffirmation. The collapse of society was not unknown in ancient Egypt, and left a deep impression on literary texts in particular. Alternatively, it would be possible to find a sociological analogy in the rigid and highly stratified social forms we have every reason to think were the norm through much of Egyptian history. Such a thesis might be considered to be a piece of reductionism, but the detail of the analogy is persuasive, and the divine world is conceived as if it were a society on the model of the human. The main reservation to be noted is that the human world is mostly excluded completely from that of the cult, so that there is an analogy but not a direct link; but this might be held to reinforce the implications of hierarchy. It can be pointed out that the only breakdown or conscious reversal of the system is during the Amarna period (c. 1350 B.C.), when the reforms of Amenhotpe IV included the promotion of people who vaunted their humble backgrounds into high office. As might be expected, the system is adhered to just as much in periods of royal weakness as of strength, and weak kings may indeed manipulate it in support of their own prestige (Baines 1974). Whether evidence of this sort is relevant or not, it should be emphasised that the hierarchies are ordering principles, and are not worshipped on their own accounts, but serve to articulate what is worshipped.

Neither of these suggestions can be tested with ease. If such an enterprise is difficult in societies where informants may be questioned, it is virtually impossible in a case where the evidence for private beliefs is scanty in the extreme, and there are few preserved texts that are critical of the received order of things. Some such texts do exist, but they are too far apart in time and context from the temple symbolism I have discussed – and themselves too much absorbed into the mainstream of Egyptian culture – to provide any decisive indication. The possible general implications may be noted, but for the moment we should return to refining our understanding of the phenomena in the terms in which they are presented. And, needless to say, I have reviewed only a small fraction of the issues involved in the study of temple symbolism.

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