

The Politics of Sacred Space: Rethinking the Origins and Architecture of the Temple of Onias

1 Introduction

The so-called Temple of Onias was a Jewish temple in the Egyptian Heliopolite nome founded sometime in the mid-second century B.C.E. by the ousted Jerusalemite high priest Onias III.¹ However, the temple's history, along with many aspects such as its exact appearance, remains shrouded in mystery, largely due to the scarcity of surviving sources. The most important source for this particular episode of ancient Jewish history is the first-century C.E. Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus. Alongside some scattered notes, Josephus provides two longer narratives on the history of the Temple of Onias in both of his major historical works, *The Judean War* and the *Jewish Antiquities*.² These accounts about Onias, the temple, and its history, however, are notoriously contradictory and replete with problems. For instance, Josephus is indecisive with regard to the identity of the Oniad high priest who built the temple and provides two candidates, Onias III and Onias IV, consequently also allowing for two different dates for its construction.³ Similarly, Josephus supplies various motives for its foundation.⁴

The fourth and final contradiction in his narratives revolves around the actual outside appearance of the temple which is the topic of this article. While, in the *Antiquities* (12.388; 13.63, 67, 72; 20.236), Josephus states that the Temple of Onias looked like its Jerusalem counterpart, however in *B.J.* 7.426, he claims just the opposite. This, of course, is solely a 'literary problem', and naturally, one would turn to more solid evidence – archaeology that is – in order to solve such a contradiction. But this involves another problem with the study of

¹ On the history of the Temple of Onias, see L. Capponi, *Il tempio di Leontopoli in Egitto: Identità politica e religiosa dei Giudei di Onia (c. 150 a.C.-73d.C.)* (Pisa: ETS, 2007) and M. M. Piotrkowski, *Priests in Exile: The History of the Temple of Onias and Its Community in the Hellenistic Period* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2019).

² *Jos. B.J.* 1.31-33; 7.421-436; *A.J.* 12.237-239, 383, 387-388; 13.62-73, 285; 14.131; 20.235-237; *C. Ap.* 2.49-55. Josephus' works are cited according to the edition of the *Loeb Classical Library: Josephus* (13 vols.; ed. and transl. R. J. Marcus, A. Wikgren, and L. H. Feldman; *Loeb Classical Library*; Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1926-1965, reprinted 1997, 1998).

³ Josephus provides two options for these questions: his *War* account (*B.J.* 1.31-33; 7.423) accredits Onias III with this deed, but in *Antiquities* he has the son of Onias III, Onias IV build the temple (*A.J.* 12.237, 383; 13.62; 20.235-237). The question of which Oniad high priest built the temple is intrinsically linked with the question of *when* the temple was founded. According to the *War* account, the date is fixed at around 170–164 B.C.E., while in *Antiquities*, Josephus dates the event approximately a decade later in the fifties of the second century B.C.E.

⁴ Onias' motive for building his temple is, according to Josephus' *Judean War* (7.431–432), rivalry with Jerusalem, but later, in *Antiquities* (13.63-64), he attributes it to its founder's quest for eternal fame.

the Temple of Onias, namely the sheer absence of any archaeological vestiges of the temple, let alone knowledge of its precise location, a caveat that is addressed in the following section.⁵

But before discussing these and other details, I will begin on a broader level by examining the contradictory narratives of Flavius Josephus regarding the Temple of Onias, focusing on his divergent claims about the temple's resemblance – or lack thereof – to the Jerusalem Temple. I argue that these inconsistencies stem from Josephus' use of multiple sources and his evolving personal and ideological outlook, particularly his commitment to a 'one-Temple' ideology that privileged Jerusalem. Following this textual analysis, I turn to the archaeological problem: the elusive location of the temple and the absence of definitive material remains. I then propose a reframing of the issue by revisiting Josephus' own claim in *Antiquities* 13.70 that Onias built his temple on the ruins of an Egyptian shrine, one dedicated to the Egyptian feline deity Bastet. This opens the way to reinterpret the Temple of Onias not as an imitation of Jerusalem's sanctuary, but as a recycled sacred space that drew upon and incorporated local Egyptian religious architecture. To support this claim, I compare Josephus' description with archaeological parallels from Ptolemaic Egypt, especially the Temple of Hathor at Deir el-Medina, whose layout and construction techniques closely match the features Josephus attributes to the Temple of Onias. I argue that this architectural resemblance is not coincidental, but rather reflects the political and military strategies of the Ptolemaic state, which frequently integrated foreign mercenaries into local Egyptian temple infrastructures. In conclusion, I suggest that in our quest to locate the Temple of Onias within the broader context of ancient Jewish sacral (temple) architecture, which we are most familiar with from Jerusalem, we should instead be looking to Egyptian paradigms.

2 One Temple, Two Problems

How did the Temple of Onias look like? As noted, the already challenging task of interpreting the textual evidence concerning the Temple of Onias is further complicated by the absence of so-called 'hard evidence' – that is, the lack of archaeological data that might help resolve the central question of this article regarding the temple's appearance. As a result, any attempt to illuminate this issue must contend with two interrelated obstacles: one textual and one archaeological. It is to these two problems that the following section now turns, and we will begin with archaeology.

⁵ On this issue, see Piotrkowski, *Priests in Exile*, 163-168; and see below, nn. 7-8.

2.1 The Archaeological Problem

Although much effort has been made to identify the vestiges of the Temple of Onias since the late 19th century, its remains have not yet been discovered.⁶ According to Josephus, Onias was granted permission by Ptolemy VI Philometor to build a Jewish temple in a place he designates ‘Leontopolis’ (*A.J.* 13.65, 70) that was located in the ‘nome’ (νομός, i.e., ‘region’ or ‘district’) of Heliopolis (*A.J.* 13.285). This location – and consequently that of the temple – is commonly identified with *Tell el-Yahoudieh* (meaning ‘Mound of the Jew’), an artificial mound located in the Eastern Nile Delta some 34 km north of Cairo.⁷ However, several factors make a conclusive identification of *Tell el-Yahoudieh* with the site of the Temple of Onias far from certain.⁸ The weightiest argument against such an identification is the fact that a ‘Leontopolis’ in the Heliopolite nome is unattested; and even if it may have existed, ancient Leontopolis, the capital of the eponymous nome, has recently been identified with *Tell Muqdam*, thus ruling out the identification of the temple with *Tell el-Yahoudieh*.⁹

A funerary epitaph found near the *Tell* referring to the ‘Land of Onias’ (‘Ονίου γᾶ; *Oniou ga*) likely implies that Onias ruled a substantial territory and would connect the site with the temple only in a general sense.¹⁰ This means that even though *Tell el-Yahoudieh* may indeed have been an Oniad settlement, i.e., a part of the ‘Land of Onias’, it may not necessarily have been the location of the temple. In this context, we may also take note of the ancient prophecy found in the biblical book of Isaiah that predicts the erection of an altar devoted to God and the building of five Jewish cities in Egypt (Isa. 19:18-19). The prophecy later served as a founding legend for Onias’ temple-building project, and is cited by both Josephus and the Rabbis in their

⁶ See M. M. Piotrkowski, ‘Temple, Leontopolis (Archaeology)’, in L. T. Stuckenbruck and D. Gurtner (eds) *Encyclopedia of Second Temple Judaism* (2 vols.; New York and London: T&T Clark, 2019), pp. 760-762.

⁷ 30°17’ N, 31°20’ E. For more on this identification, see E. Brugsch-Bey, ‘On et Onion’, *RecTrav* 8 (1886), pp. 1-9; E. Naville and F. Griffith, *The Mound of the Jew and the City of Onias* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1890); W. M. F. Petrie, *Hyksos and Israelite Cities* (London: British School of Archaeology, 1906), pp. 18-27.

⁸ The most detailed refutation of Petrie’s identification is by G. Hata, ‘Where is the Temple Site of Onias IV in Egypt?’, in J. Pastor, P. Stern, and M. Mor (eds), *Flavius Josephus: Interpretation and History* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 177-91. See also G. Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), pp. 27-29 and the even earlier reservations of R. du Mesnil du Buisson, ‘Compte rendu sommaire d’une mission à Tell el-Yahoudiyé’, *BIFAO* 29 (1929), pp. 155-78; idem, ‘Le Temple d’Onias et le Camp d’Hyksós à Tell el-Yahoudiyé’, *BIFAO* 35 (1935), pp. 59-71; see also Rosenberg’s comments: ‘It must be added that the siting and reconstruction proposed by W. M. Flinders Petrie, who located it at Tel el-Yehudiya, is suspect and has not received further corroboration. In a recent visit to the site, I remained unconvinced and, in any case similarity to a known Jewish temple or indeed the description of the Wilderness Tabernacle must remain tentative.’ S. G. Rosenberg, ‘The Jewish Temple at Elephantine’, *Near Eastern Archaeology* 67 (2004), pp. 11-12; and, in particular, Piotrkowski, *Priests in Exile*, pp. 163-168.

⁹ C. A. Redmount and R. F. Friedman, ‘Tales of a Delta Site: The 1995 Field Season at Tell El-Muqdam’, *JARCE* 34 (1997), pp. 57-83; J. Yoyotte, ‘Sites et cultes de Basse-Egypte: Les deux Léontopolis’, *Annuaire - Ecole pratique des hautes études. Section des sciences religieuses* 97 (1988-89), pp. 669-83.

¹⁰ W. Horbury and D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions from Greco-Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 90-94; [henceforth: *JIGRE*], no. 38.

respective accounts of the foundation of the Temple of Onias.¹¹ Conspicuously, Isa. 19:18 predicts the existence of ‘five cities in the land of Egypt speaking the Canaanite language’ and one may accordingly speculate on whether Onias sought to establish not one settlement, but many.¹²

Since Josephus repeatedly mentions that the Temple of Onias was located in the Heliopolite nome,¹³ one may surmise that it may have once stood in the region (χώρα) surrounding the city of Heliopolis.¹⁴ Thus, as long as the actual remains of the Temple of Onias have not been discovered, the question of its location remains in limbo. Consequently, and more relevant to this inquiry, it also leaves open the question of the temple’s exterior appearance and therefore compels us to rely on the literary evidence. Yet, as I hope to show in the following sections, archaeological evidence from elsewhere in Egypt can, nevertheless, be of assistance in this case. But let us scrutinise the textual issues first.

2.2 The Textual Problem

As I have pointed out earlier, Josephus, our main source for the history of the Temple of Onias, dedicated two extended accounts of it in his two major historical works, the *Judaean War* and the *Jewish Antiquities*.¹⁵ These two narratives contain several contradictions regarding the circumstances of the temple’s foundation and other issues, among them, several instances in which Josephus revokes in *Antiquities* – and even elsewhere in his *Judaean War* (at 1.33) – a statement in *B.J.* 7 (§426) about the temple’s outside appearance. While in *B.J.* 1.33, *A.J.* 12.388, 13.285, and 20.236 he stresses that the temple resembled the Temple of Jerusalem, in *B.J.* 7.426, he claims just the opposite, namely that ‘he [i.e. Onias] did *not* build it similar to the one in Jerusalem (οὐχ ὅμοιον ᾠκοδόμησε τῷ ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις)’ – with the exception of the altar.¹⁶

¹¹ For Josephus, see *B.J.* 7.432; *A.J.* 13.64, 71; for the Rabbis, see *yYoma* 6:3 (43c) and *bMenah.*109b. Most scholars assume that Isa. 19:16-25 is a later addition, but not as late as the finalization of LXX Isaiah (140-125 B.C.E.). J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 317-320.

¹² See also Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth*, p. 27.

¹³ *B.J.* 1.33; 7.426; *A.J.* 12.388; 13.285; 20.236.

¹⁴ See Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth*, p. 27; Piotrkowski, *Priests in Exile*, pp. 342–346.

¹⁵ See n. 2, above.

¹⁶ The emphasis and translation are mine. This reading is sound; there is no indication that, say, the οὐχ (‘not’) is a textual corruption which would, of course, explain the contradiction in view of the contents of the other passages.

But, let us hear first what Josephus has to say about the appearance of the Oniad temple edifice, which he describes at some length in *B.J.* 7.427-430:

Induced by this statement, Ptolemy [VI Philometor] gave him [i.e., Onias] a tract, a hundred and eighty furlongs distant from Memphis, in the nome called Heliopolis. Here, Onias erected a fortress and built his temple – which was *not* like that in Jerusalem, but resembled that of a tower – of *huge stones and sixty cubits in altitude*. The altar, however, he designed on the model of that in the home country, and adorned the building with similar offerings, the fashion of the lampstand excepted; for, instead of making a stand, he had a lamp wrought of gold which shed a brilliant light and was suspended by a gold chain. The sacred precincts (τέμενος) were wholly surrounded by a *wall of baked brick, the doorways being of stone*.¹⁷

This passage, *B.J.* 7.427-430, next to Josephus' remarks in *B.J.* 1.33, *A.J.* 12.388, 13.285, and 20.236 about the temple's resemblance to its Jerusalemite counterpart, constitutes the *only* detailed description we possess of the Oniad temple-edifice. Therefore, this text is of primary concern in this study. Although Josephus provides another narrative on the Temple of Onias in *Antiquities* 13, he refrains from supplying it with another description, save for the brief remark that 'Onias took over the place [i.e., a former Egyptian shrine of Bubastis] and built a temple and an altar to God similar to that in Jerusalem, but smaller and poorer (*A.J.* 13.72).'¹⁸ In fact, when speaking of the temple's anterior appearance in the same paragraph, he refers his readers to his account in *B.J.* 7 just cited. He does so, presumably, because, by the time he composed his account of the temple in the *Antiquities* after having lived about twenty years in the diaspora in Rome, many things connected to the temple and its cult, which ceased to exist, were no longer of relevance to him.¹⁹ In those twenty years, Josephus experienced a personal change, including a change in his religious outlook, turning from a proud Judaeen Jerusalem priest to a diaspora Jew in Rome.²⁰

¹⁷ *B.J.* 7.427-430. The emphases in the text are mine.

¹⁸ Λαβὼν οὖν τὸν τόπον ὃν Ὀνίας κατεσκεύασεν ἱερὸν καὶ βωμὸν τῷ θεῷ ὅμοιον τῷ ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις, μικρότερον δὲ καὶ πενιχρότερον.

¹⁹ On this issue, see M.M. Piotrkowski, 'Josephus on Onias and the Oniad Temple', *JSQ* 24 (2018), pp. 1-16; and M. Tuval, *From Jerusalem Priest to Roman Jew* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) on the issue of Josephus' personal change.

²⁰ See our previous note.

Let us now consider what Josephus actually has to say about the appearance of the Oniad sanctuary. Besides the jarring statement that the temple did *not* resemble its Jerusalemite counterpart, he describes other distinct features of its edifice. Notably, Josephus describes the sanctuary itself as resembling a tower, 60 cubits high – an element that, according to him, further set it apart from the Jerusalem Temple. However, at first sight, the 60-cubit height of Onias' temple-structure, in fact, corresponds to the height of the Jerusalem Temple, prior to the Herodian renovation.²¹ Elsewhere in his writings, Josephus provides different measurements, probably referring to the Temple of his day, after the Herodian makeover: Once, at *B.J.* 5.207, he states that the Jerusalem Temple measured 100 x 100 cubits,²² while its building at the back was narrower and measured 60 cubits in width; and once in *A.J.* 15.391, he says that the building was 100 cubits wide and 120 cubits in height.²³ These descriptions are, in and of themselves, problematic and are not the subject of this study.²⁴ Suffice it to say that for Josephus, who had in mind these dimensions of the Jerusalem Temple when penning his description of the Temple of Onias, the latter indeed appears to have been smaller in scale. However, even if the dimensions of the Herodian edifice provided by Josephus are correct, they reflect the reality of a certain period of time – in this particular case, that of the Roman period.

Another feature that, according to Josephus, allegedly set the Temple of Onias apart from its Jerusalem counterpart was its resemblance to a tower (discussed further below). However, while one encounters several impressions of how the Jerusalem Temple looked from afar in ancient Jewish literature,²⁵ other contemporary sources, in fact, also employ tower imagery,²⁶ and a theme that warrants closer examination in what follows.

One of the most revealing items and essential clues in Josephus' description of the temple for our purpose, however, is his depiction of the temple's *temenos* (i.e., its sacred precinct). It was, as Josephus writes, completely surrounded by a mud-brick wall that had several entrances

²¹ See e.g. Ezra 6:3; I Esdras 6:4; see also *A.J.* 11.99 for Zerubbabel's Temple and *A.J.* 15.385 (for Herod's Temple); see also R. Hayward, 'The Jewish Temple at Leontopolis: A Reconsideration', *JJS* 33 (1982), pp. 433-434.

²² *mMid.* 4:7 provides the same dimensions.

²³ The same height is recorded in 2 Chr 3:4 for Solomon's Temple; and see, correspondingly, *A.J.* 8.64.

²⁴ On this issue, see J. Schwartz and Y. Peleg, 'Notes on the Virtual Reconstruction of the Herodian Period Temple and Courtyards', in S. Fine (ed), *The Temple of Jerusalem: From Moses to the Messiah. In Honor of Professor Louis H. Feldman* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 69-89.

²⁵ For example, in *B.J.* 5.223, where the temple is likened to a snow-covered mountain on account of its gilded façade, or that it looked like a reclining lion in the eyes of the Rabbis in *mMid.* 4:7.

²⁶ E.g., 1 Enoch 89:73; Targum Jonathan to Isa 5:2 and *Exodus Rabbah* 20:5; see also Hayward, 'The Jewish Temple at Leontopolis', pp. 432-433.

made of stone.²⁷ While the Temple of Jerusalem also featured several gates,²⁸ it certainly was not circumferenced by a mud-brick wall like the one described by Josephus. Accordingly, anyone acquainted with the appearance of the Jerusalem Temple would readily agree that Josephus' description of the Oniad structure bears no resemblance to it.

3 Approaching the Problem: Reality and Rhetoric — What Josephus Knew and What He Did with It

With Josephus as our sole source for the appearance of the Temple of Onias – and in the absence of archaeological evidence to either support or challenge his account – we must ask: how can we account for the contradictions and inconsistencies in his narrative? In my view, two complementary explanations can readily be offered: first, the use Josephus made of his sources; and second, the ways in which he, as an *author*, reworked those sources to align with his own narrative aims and personal outlook. Let us begin by examining the sources Josephus may have used in his description of the Temple of Onias.

3.1 Josephus' Source for the Description of the Temple

The Temple of Onias stood for approximately 200 years (from ca. 168 B.C.E. to 73/74 C.E.) spanning the Ptolemaic to the Roman period.²⁹ While Josephus (b. 37 – d. ca. 100 C.E.) was a contemporary of both temples, he was not yet born when the Temple of Onias was founded. For that reason, we must first acknowledge that his description of the sanctuary is based on a (or more) source(s). This holds true for his account in *B.J.* 7 as well as for his narrative of Onias and his actions in *Antiquities* 13. What, then, was (or were) Josephus' source(s)?

Josephus states that he visited Alexandria twice in the company of Vespasian and Titus: once in 69 C.E.,³⁰ and again during a brief stay with Titus following the winter of 71 C.E.,³¹ prior to their departure for Rome. In addition to these visits, Gohei Hata has proposed that Josephus spent approximately a full year in Egypt (between 65 and 66 C.E.) on his return from

²⁷ Josephus does not specify the number of gates.

²⁸ J. Patrich, '583 BCE - 70 CE: The Temple ("Beyt ha-Miqdash") and its Mount', in O. Grabar and B. Z. Kedar (eds), *Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Jerusalem's Sacred Esplanade* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press, 2009), p. 55.

²⁹ On these dates see, Piotrkowski, *Priests in Exile*, pp. 328-331, 363 (and there, n. 143).

³⁰ *B.J.* 4.656; *Vita* 415.

³¹ *B.J.* 7.117.

his embassy to Rome.³² He further conjectures that Josephus may have visited the Temple of Onias on one or more of these occasions.

Accordingly, he must be considered an eye-witness. However, all this remains in the realm of speculation. In fact, there is no clear-cut evidence that would suggest that Josephus ever laid eyes on the Temple of Onias; the more so, since he nowhere makes such a claim.

We must be similarly cautious regarding another detail in Josephus' biography: according to his *Vita* (autobiography), he married an Alexandrian woman who might have had some knowledge of the Temple of Onias.³³ But whether or not she communicated her knowledge about the temple to her husband, given that she had such indeed, cannot be corroborated and stands on the same shaky ground, much as the above-mentioned conjectures. For this reason, we must reject the assumption that Josephus had intimate and personal knowledge of the Temple of Onias altogether and consequently, must have relied on a (or more) written source(s) when penning his narratives on that particular Jewish sanctuary in Egypt.

This becomes evident, when thoroughly reading Josephus' narrative of the temple, in particular, in *B.J.* 7 where one may comfortably distinguish Josephus' sources for his temple-narrative.³⁴ What emerges from a closer reading of that passage (*B.J.* 7.420-437) is that Josephus had two (written) sources on his table for his description of the Oniad temple-edifice and its appurtenances in *B.J.* 7: One source that contained information about the circumstances of the foundation of the Temple of Onias, a kind of 'foundation legend,' and what seems to be a Roman source, which stands behind *B.J.* 7.420-422, 426-427, and 433-437.³⁵ This is also where we encounter the contradictory statement about the non-resemblance of the Temple of Onias and the Jerusalem Temple. However, not everything in his source was copied verbatim; rather, it may be assumed that Josephus summarized the material he found in his (Roman) source in §§ 426-427, and that this passage, in fact, reflects his own assessment of that source.

Concerning Josephus' contradiction in his description of the outside appearance of the Temple of Onias, we should note first, that usually, whenever Josephus contradicts himself, it

³² G. Hata, 'Imagining Some Dark Periods in Josephus' Life', in F. Parente and J. Sievers (eds), *Josephus & the History of Greco-Roman Period: Essays in Memory of Morton Smith* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), p. 316 (and there nn. 17 and 20).

³³ *Vita* 415.

³⁴ I rely here on Piotrkowski's analysis of the relevant passages in *Priests in Exile*, pp. 40-53 and see also the subsequent note.

³⁵ On Josephus' Roman source, see Piotrkowski, *Priests in Exile*, pp. 50-53. Because these passages recount the closure/destruction of the Temple of Onias by the Romans, Piotrkowski argues that Josephus' Roman source was most probably a military report, which also contained all the details about the appearance of the temple. On the question whether the Temple of Onias was, in fact, destroyed by the Romans – as its Jerusalemite counterpart in 70 CE – or merely 'shut down,' as Josephus wants us to believe, see *ibid.*, pp. 363-364 (and there, nn. 145 and 146).

is because of the hapless manner in which he juggled two different (or more) sources;³⁶ and second, these contradictions may be the result of a change that took place between composition of the first description and the composition of the second one. Recall that the Temple of Onias stood for circa two hundred years and any building standing that long would undergo repairs (mainly because of natural erosion and decay) and even minor and major renovations once in a while. Thus, a building described in the Hellenistic period will have, arguably, little in common with a building described in the later Roman period. The same holds true with respect to the Jerusalem Temple, a complex that underwent major structural changes between the Hellenistic and Roman periods, especially, as is well known, in the days of Herod.³⁷ Therefore, we must assume that the Temple of Onias, too, underwent some structural changes and renovation over time. Thus, the question of whether or not Onias built a replica of the Jerusalem Temple in Egypt depends on which structures are being compared; and we must assume that this is what stands behind Josephus' contradictory remark: While composing his description of the Temple of Onias in *B.J.* 7, Josephus was confronted with a source (his Roman military report) that essentially described a pre-Herodian structure erected in the Ptolemaic period. We may imagine him gnashing his teeth when comparing the contents of this report with the image of the Jerusalem temple-edifice in his mind's eye, a structure he was very familiar with from his youth, notably in its *post*-Herodian garb, i.e., after an elaborate renovation and expansion. So, Josephus quite obviously decided to retract his previous statement about the resemblance of both temples based on this source and his own assessment of it. Once we count these factors in, the problem of the Josephan contradiction becomes readily explainable. And there is also another element to consider, namely Josephus' own perception of things and how he used and moulded his sources into his narratives on Onias and his temple.

3.2 Jerusalem the Great and Heliopolis the Small?³⁸ *A.J.* 13.72 and Josephus' *Tendenz*

In the previous section, I have attempted to solve Josephus' contradictory remark about the resemblance, or non-resemblance, of the Temple of Onias with the Jerusalem Temple by

³⁶ D. R. Schwartz, *Reading the First Century: On Reading Josephus and Studying Jewish History of the First Century* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), pp. 12-13.

³⁷ For an overview of the various construction phases of the Temple of Jerusalem during the Second Temple Period, see Patrich, '583 BCE - 70 CE: The Temple ("Beyt ha-Miqdash") and its Mount', pp. 36-71; pp. 387-390.

³⁸ This quote is taken from *yHag.* 2:2 (77d) and may have had the intention to reflect the superiority of Jerusalem (and its Temple) vis-à-vis the Egyptian diaspora (and possibly, its sanctuary, the Temple of Onias). This is argued by P. Schäfer, "From Jerusalem the Great to Alexandria the Small:" The Relationship between Palestine and Egypt in the Graeco-Roman Period', in P. Schäfer (ed), *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture.* vol.1 (3 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), pp. 129-140.

arguing that Josephus, while penning his narrative in *B.J.* 7, had on his table a source about the outside appearance of the Temple of Onias that led him to negate his previous (and later) statements that the temple resembled the one in Jerusalem. This observation is Josephus' very own and expresses his perception and assessment.

Moreover, besides *B.J.* 7.427-430, Josephus does not provide many more details about the Oniad temple-structure. The only exceptions are a note in *A.J.* 13.70 that Onias received permission from the Ptolemaic king (Philometor VI) to 'cleanse the ruined temple of Bubastis-of-the-Fields' in order to refurbish it and build one of his own, and another brief personal remark two paragraphs later, in *A.J.* 13.72, that both the Oniad edifice and its altar, though similar, were 'smaller and poorer' in comparison to their Jerusalemite counterparts. While the first remark in *A.J.* 13.70 is an important clue as to how the Temple of Onias must have looked before its refurbishing began, the second note at *A.J.* 13.72 is, from the perspective of a member of the Oniad community, certainly not flattering and clearly pejorative.

We recall that Josephus began his career as a proud Jerusalemite priest, before being forced into exile in Rome. He was also an ardent proponent of a 'one-Temple-one-city' ideology (i.e., the notion that Jews should be loyal to one temple only, namely the one in Jerusalem),³⁹ a theme that is developed, and recurs, especially in his later writings.⁴⁰ Therefore, anyone who took it upon himself to build a (Jewish) temple other than in Jerusalem, did not find much grace and glory in Josephus' eyes.⁴¹ Consequently, Onias and his temple-building-project is depicted in a negative light and the pejorative remark about the 'indigence' of the Temple of Onias vis-à-vis the Jerusalem Temple, fits well into the overall anti-Oniad spirit of his narrative in the *Antiquities*.⁴²

However, and by way of summarizing our discussion of this and the previous sections, the latter datum in *A.J.* 13.72 may well convey an actual historical fact. Comparing the contents of the Roman source Josephus used in writing his narrative in *B.J.* 7, listing details about the appearance of the Temple of Onias, with what he knew and remembered about how the Jerusalem Temple had looked like, caused him to change his mind and replace his earlier

³⁹ G. Bohak, 'Theopolis: A Single-Temple Policy and Its Singular Ramifications', *JJS* 50 (1999), pp. 3-16.

⁴⁰ See e.g., *A.J.* 4.200ff.; *C. Ap.* 2.193.

⁴¹ On that issue, see in particular Piotrkowski, 'Josephus on Onias,' pp. 1-16 and also R. Last, 'Onias IV and the ἀδέσποτος ἱερός: Placing *Antiquities* 13.62-73 into the Context of Ptolemaic Land Tenure', *JSJ* 41 (2010), pp. 494-516. Last notes that the term *adespotos hieros* (unowned temple [land]) in *A.J.* 13.67 is to be understood in a derogatory light and suggests that the land on which the Temple of Onias was built was acquired under shady circumstances; Compare Capponi, *Il tempio di Leontopoli in Egitto*, p. 66, who explains the anti-Oniad spirit of Josephus' Onias narrative in the *Antiquities* in light of his (alleged) Hasmonean ancestry (see *Vita* 2).

⁴² See our previous note.

statement (*B.J.* 1.33).⁴³ The Temple of Onias, apparently, had little in common with the grandiose building complex devised and executed by Herod with which Josephus was familiar from his youth. This also holds true with respect to the mud-brick wall that surrounded the Oniad temple-edifice. Thus, we can both accept Josephus' remark that the Temple of Onias was 'poorer and smaller' than its Jerusalemite counterpart, while at the same time, acknowledge that it suits Josephus' own *Tendenz* of denigrating Onias and his sanctuary.

4 A Preliminary Summary of the Evidence – Are We Looking in the Right Place?

Having pointed out and discussed all the textual and archaeological problems associated with the appearance of the Temple of Onias in the previous sections of this inquiry, what is it that we can actually say about the temple's appearance?

I have stressed that the only real description of the Oniad temple-edifice is preserved in Book Seven of Josephus' *Judaean War* (*B.J.* 7.427-430), which is essentially based on a Roman military report, presumably put together around the time of the temple's closure/destruction in the early 70s of the first century C.E. The little information we gain from it is that the Temple of Onias was a structure similar to a tower, 60 cubits in height, whose precinct was completely surrounded by a mud-brick wall that had several entrances made of stone (stone-gates). From several other comments in Josephus' parallel narrative in *Antiquities* 13 we learn that the Oniad temple-complex was smaller and 'poorer' in comparison with, presumably, the grandiose Herodian temple complex in Jerusalem, which Josephus knew. True, a simple mud-brick wall of the kind that surrounded the Temple of Onias would hardly astound a visitor as would, say, the famed *stoa* of the Jerusalem Temple and/or one of its gilded gates.⁴⁴

If the Temple of Onias bore little resemblance to its bigger brother in Jerusalem, then perhaps it had a closer resemblance to its predecessor, the Jewish Temple of Elephantine – the only other Jewish shrine in Egypt we know of.

⁴³ See also Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth*, p. 38; P. A. Rainbow, 'The Last Oniad and the Teacher of Righteousness', *JJS* 48 (1997), p. 32. Note that *B.J.* 1.31-33 functions as an introductory summary of the episode of the Temple of Onias, most probably fulfilling a literary-stylistic role in the overall *Ringkomposition* in which Josephus' *Judaean War* appears to have been written. See Piotrkowski, *Priests in Exile*, pp. 40-47 and S. Mason, 'Structures and Aims of Josephus' *Judaean War*', in E.-M. Becker and A. Klostegaard Petersen (eds), *Early Christianity in Context: Studies in Religion, Culture, and Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 7-11.

⁴⁴ By this I refer to the so-called Nicanor Gate in the Jerusalem Temple; see *mMid.* 1:4; 2:3; *mYoma* 3:10; *tYoma* 2:4; *mTamid* 1:3; *B.J.* 5.204-205 and L. I. Levine, *Jerusalem: Portrait of the City in the Second Temple Period (538 B.C.E. – 70 C.E.)* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2002), p. 237. The use of mud-bricks as the most common construction material is characteristic of Egyptian architecture, sacred, as well as profane. On its use, B. Kemp, 'Soil (including mud-brick architecture)', in P. T. Nicholson and I. Shaw (eds), *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 78-103.

4.1 The Jewish Temple of Elephantine

Long before Onias founded his temple in Heliopolis, in the Persian period, a Jewish community of mercenaries on Elephantine Island maintained their own sanctuary. This temple, documented in the fifth-century B.C.E. Aramaic papyri discovered on the island, offers the closest precedent for Jewish temple-building in Egypt.

In 1997, a German team of archaeologists excavating Elephantine Island uncovered a section of tiled flooring that was far superior to that of the surrounding mud-brick houses. They identified it as the floor of the Jewish temple, a conclusion later confirmed by the location described in papyri analysed by Bezalel Porten.⁴⁵ The temple was located near the southern end of the island, strategically positioned close to the Nile's eastern bank and integrated within the city's sacred and administrative center, and opposite of the Egyptian temple of Khnum.⁴⁶

The sanctuary, which probably had two chambers, appears to have been positioned off-centre, and was set in a large courtyard surrounding it on all four sides. Its offset positioning may have been conceptualized this way in order to ensure that its southern wall avoided encroaching on the 'Street of the King.' The temple's roof was constructed from solid cedar beams, as referenced in contemporary documents, and was likely topped with a thick layer of plastered mud that required annual maintenance.⁴⁷

No altar was discovered, but there is literary evidence for animal and, later, cereal sacrifices in the later phase of the temple's life.⁴⁸ The altar seems to have been located in the courtyard, but its exact design remains unknown. The courtyard would have included space for animal sacrifices and drainage for the blood. The precinct was accessed through five doorways, though only two led directly into the temple; the remaining three provided access to the courtyard. While the doorways likely featured stone-lined doorways with bronze hinges, the rest of the structure was built from mud-brick, with wall thickness corresponding to the foundation remains.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ W. Kaiser et al., *Stadt Und Tempel Von Elephantine: 23./24. Grabungsbericht* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1997).

⁴⁶ B. Porten, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 35–36; V. Leppert, 'Elephantine – Global und Lokal', in V. Leppert (ed), *Elephantine: Insel der Jahrtausende* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2024), pp. 15-16.

⁴⁷ Rosenberg, 'The Jewish Temple', p. 6.

⁴⁸ Note too, that the tiled floor was built in two phases, indicative of destruction and later rebuilding. See C. von Pilgrim, 'Das Aramäische Quartier im Stadtgebiet der 27. Dynastie', *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts in Kairo* 58 (2002), pp. 192-197.

⁴⁹ This is what emerges from the 'Petition to Bagoas and Delaia', written in 407 B.C.E. (*TAD* A4.7 in Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt, vol. 1: Letters* [Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1986], pp. 57–63).

We may assume that, as in descriptions of the Wilderness Tabernacle and the Solomonic Temple, there were probably vessels for ritual washing (Exod. 30:18) and space for tethering animals. Due to its close proximity to the residential area, it is likely that laypeople participated in rituals at the temple site – similar to the practices at the shrine in Shiloh (1 Sam. 1:12). This may explain the presence of the multiple doorways leading into the courtyard. Such accessibility contrasts with the Temple in Jerusalem, where the inner precincts were strictly reserved for priests and Levites.⁵⁰

When compared with the biblical depictions of the desert sanctuary (*Mishkan*) and the Solomonic Temple, the Elephantine shrine bears a closer resemblance to the *Mishkan* of Exodus 25–27. Like the *Mishkan*, it stood in an open space with clear surroundings on all sides, whereas Solomon’s Temple, described in 1 Kings 6 and 2 Chronicles 3, was a larger structure not set within such a courtyard.⁵¹ The *Mishkan* itself consisted of a two-room shrine (*cella* and *naos*) measuring 10 x 30 cubits (ca. 5 × 15 m),⁵² and was enclosed within a courtyard of 50 x 100 cubits (ca. 25 × 50 m),⁵³ most of which lay in front of the shrine and contained the sacrificial altar. The Elephantine temple, by contrast, measured about 6 × 16 m, with a surrounding courtyard of ca. 23 × 40 m (and possibly somewhat larger, as suggested above). This courtyard too must have contained an altar, the use of which provoked the hostility of the Khnum priesthood. Even from its fragmentary remains, however, the proportions of shrine to courtyard at Elephantine closely parallel those of the *Mishkan*: a shrine three times as long as it was wide, set within a courtyard twice as long as it was wide. The one major point of divergence lies in orientation, since the Elephantine temple’s presumed entrance faced southwest and its naos northeast. This irregularity is best explained by its placement within the local topography, between the ‘Aramaean Quarter’ of the Jewish colony and the ‘Street of the King.’⁵⁴ In conclusion, the Jewish shrine at Elephantine was entirely unlike the Jerusalem Temple as described in the Bible and in its later iterations, and it bore little resemblance to the sanctuary of Onias, apart from the use of mud-brick walls and stone gates.

⁵⁰ Rosenberg, ‘The Jewish Temple’, p. 12.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 10, 12.

⁵² Exod. 26:16-22.

⁵³ Exod. 27:11-13.

⁵⁴ Rosenberg, ‘The Jewish Temple’, p. 12.

4.2 ‘[Onias] built his temple – which was not like that in Jerusalem, but resembled that of a tower...’ (*B.J.* 7.427): On Towers and Temples

Another feature that, according to Josephus, distinguished the Temple of Onias from its Jerusalem counterpart was its resemblance to a tower. Some ancient Jewish sources describe impressions of the Jerusalem Temple as seen from afar,⁵⁵ but only very few contemporary sources employ tower imagery in reference to it.⁵⁶ The most explicit example appears in the so-called ‘Animal Apocalypse’ (1 Enoch 89:73):

They again began to build as before; and they raised up that tower which is called the high tower. But they started to place a table before the tower, with all the food which is upon it being polluted and impure.⁵⁷

Such imagery was exceptional in Jewish contexts, whereas in Egypt, tower-like structures were far more common and are better known as ‘tower houses.’⁵⁸ Egyptian tower houses, a type of dwelling that first appeared in the Third Intermediate Period (ca. 1069–664 B.C.E.), are attested archaeologically at numerous sites across Egypt, particularly in the Delta and Fayum regions.⁵⁹ They were in use from the Late Period (26th Dynasty) through the Roman era and remained common into Late Antiquity and the early Medieval period. These houses were often square at the base and rose several stories, creating a tower-like appearance. Their construction relied primarily on sun-dried mud-brick, with walls often more than a meter thick, reinforced by pan-bedded brickwork and wooden beams to support their height. Entrances were typically elevated and reached by staircases, while flat roofs served as terraces. For security, narrow windows were set high on the ground floor, with larger clustered openings on the upper stories to provide light and ventilation.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ For example, in *B.J.* 5.223, where the temple is likened to a snow-covered mountain on account of its gilded façade, or that it looked like a reclining lion in the eyes of the Rabbis in *mMid.* 4:7.

⁵⁶ See above, n. 26.

⁵⁷ E. Isaac, ‘1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) ENOCH’, in J. H. Charlesworth (ed), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. vol. 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (2 vols.; Garden City: Doubleday 1983), p. 69; cf., also *Targum Jonathan* on Isa 5:2 and *Exodus Rabbah* 20:5; see also Hayward, ‘The Jewish Temple at Leontopolis’, pp. 432-433.

⁵⁸ M. Lehmann, ‘Tower Houses,’ in W. Wendrich (ed), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, 2021), pp. 1-23; in <http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz002kp5c6>, accessed 1 August 2025.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Far from being solely residential, tower houses were highly versatile. In addition to serving as dwellings, they could function as administrative centres, temples, or secure storage facilities, especially when situated within temple enclosures or fortified settlements. Their casemate foundations were likewise adapted for priestly quarters, storehouses, and other components of temple architecture.⁶¹

What is particularly interesting – and noteworthy – is that in the early Ptolemaic period the word *pyrgos* (πύργος) is attested in papyri in reference to tower houses, a usage that continued into Byzantine times.⁶² Consider Josephus' description in *B.J.* 7.427, where he states that Onias 'erected a fortress and built his temple – which was not like that in Jerusalem, but resembled a tower (ἀλλὰ πύργῳ παραπλήσιον) – of huge stones and sixty cubits in height.' Could it be that Josephus meant Onias' Temple resembled a tower house?

The existence of tower structures within Egyptian Temple compounds for defence purposes, is quite a striking observation, given what Josephus has to say about the Temple of Onias. It also implies that Onias' sanctuary more closely resembled Egyptian, rather than Jewish architectural features. For that matter, this notion is strengthened considering that Josephus also provides us, in the same narrative, with another important clue as to how the Temple of Onias must have looked; namely, Onias had, in fact, built his temple on the ruins of a native Egyptian shrine dedicated to the feline-goddess Bastet/Bubastis.⁶³

So, while we were tangled up in determining in what way, and if it all, the Temple of Onias resembled its 'bigger brother' in Jerusalem, or, in other words, while we were busy looking at structures featuring characteristics of Jewish sacral architecture,⁶⁴ it seems that in this case, we need to adopt a different mind-set. That is, we should consider that the Temple of Onias had more in common with local, Egyptian/Ptolemaic, temple structures than it did with any of the known models we are familiar with from Jerusalem.⁶⁵

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2-4.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶³ On Bast/Bastet, see J. Málek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt* (London: The British Museum Press, 1993), pp. 94-111, pp. 126-127.

⁶⁴ E.g., a tripartite division of the *naos*, the 60-cubit-dimensions of the temple, or any other distinct features comparable to the Temple of Jerusalem; see e.g. Petrie's arguments in W. M. F. Petrie, *Hyksos and Israelite Cities*, pp. 20-26.

⁶⁵ On the various building phases and appearances of the Jerusalem Temple-complex, see Patrich, '583 BCE - 70 CE: The Temple ("Beyt ha-Miqdash") and its Mount', pp. 37-72.

5 'Is It Pleasing to God that a Temple Be Built in a Place So Wild and Full of Sacred Animals?' — Putting *A.J.* 13.70 into Perspective: The Temple of Onias and Contemporary Ptolemaic Defence Strategy

The recent years have seen much scholarly attention devoted to the Ptolemaic military/defence apparatus and its involvement in native Egyptian religious institutions, first and foremost, temples. Several studies have underlined, on the one hand, the role of the military, especially that of foreign soldiers, in the building and maintenance of Egyptian temples in later Ptolemaic Egypt, and on the other, the increasing role of Egyptian natives in the Ptolemaic administration and military.⁶⁶ In view of these findings, we may assess the place of Onias' community of mercenaries and their temple in the same historical context.

Recent evidence indicates that Philometor's permission to settle (Jewish) mercenaries (including their role in the military and administration) in and around a native Egyptian temple, together with the erection of a Jewish sanctuary, was by no means an isolated case. Other examples for 'foreigners' serving both as military administrators and local high priests in Ptolemaic Egypt exist.⁶⁷ As such, we must assume that Onias was assigned refurbishment of an already existing Egyptian temple as well as acting as its high priest. There is only one problem, namely that, according to Josephus, this temple was dedicated previously to the Egyptian cat-deity Bastet.⁶⁸ For obvious reasons, it did not behove a pious Jewish priest to become the high priest of a pagan (native Egyptian) cult and Josephus thus accused Onias of accepting the king's offer and establishing a temple on a site that *impure* according to Jewish law.⁶⁹ Onias, however, did not accept the king's offer to act as high priest of the Bastet cult, but petitioned to dedicate the temple to the Jewish God instead. Reading *A.J.* 13.70 from a historical perspective and taking into account Josephus' own anti-Oniad *Tendenz*, all that is stated there is that Onias was assigned by the king (or petitioned for) a location that housed a

⁶⁶ See e.g., G. Dietze, 'Temples and Soldiers in Southern Ptolemaic Egypt: Some Epigraphic Evidence', in L. Mooren (ed), *Politics, Administration and Society in the Hellenistic and Roman World: Proceedings of the International Colloquium, Bertinoro 19-24 July 1997* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), pp. 77-89; G. Gorre, *Les relations du clergé égyptien et des Lagides d'après les sources privées* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008); Ch. Fischer-Bovet, 'Army and Egyptian Temple Building under the Ptolemies', (2007), pp. 1-20 in: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1426940, accessed 17 September 2025; Chr. Thiers, 'Civils et militaires dans le temple: Occupation illicite et expulsion', *BIFAO* 95 (1995), pp. 493-516; I. S. Moyer, 'Court, Chora, and Culture in Late Ptolemaic Egypt', *AJP* 132 (2011), pp. 15-44. See also M. P. Perdrizet, 'Un fondation du temps de Ptolémée Épiphane, le temple du dieu lion à Léontopolis', *CRAI* 66 (1922), pp. 320-323.

⁶⁷ For Idumeans, see U. Rappaport, 'Les Iduméens en Egypte,' *RP* 43 (1969), pp. 73-82. For the evidence pointing to the Samaritans in Egypt, see A. Kasher, 'Samaritans in Hellenistic Egypt', in E. Stern and H. Eshel (eds), *The Samaritans* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press / The Israeli Antiquities Authority, 2002), pp. 153-165.

⁶⁸ *A.J.* 13.70. On the Egyptian feline deity Bast/Bastet, see above, n. 63.

⁶⁹ See also Piotrkowski, 'Josephus on Onias', pp. 10-15.

native Egyptian temple that he had to fortify and to refurbish for defensive purposes and to become the high priest of this cult. While Onias, gladly (we presume), accepted the offer of the location and the post, he must have asked to exchange the cult of Bastet with that of YAHWEH, to which the king acquiesced – the native Egyptian population, by contrast, less so.⁷⁰

This point is of importance, because, in our pursuit of the appearance of the Temple of Onias, this detail compels us to look for a structure that features characteristics of a fortified and refurbished native Egyptian temple from the Ptolemaic period. Indeed, one structure answering this definition from elsewhere in Egypt is particularly revealing.

6 The Temple of Hathor at Deir el-Medina — A Blueprint of the Temple of Onias?

Deir el-Medina is the modern Arabic name of an ancient Egyptian village founded by Amenhotep I (ca.1541-1520 B.C.E.), which housed labourers and artisans who built and decorated the rock-cut necropolises in the Valley of the Kings and Valley of the Queens from the 18th to the 20th dynasties of the New Kingdom of Egypt (ca. 1550–1080 B.C.E.).⁷¹ The site is located on the west bank of the Nile, across the river from modern-day Luxor.⁷² Archaeological excavations at the site have unearthed the vestiges of the village itself in addition to two large cemeteries and a religious area, but also documentary and literary texts preserved on papyri and ostraca.⁷³ There is evidence that the site was continuously inhabited from the New Kingdom period onwards and throughout the Ptolemaic, Roman and Byzantine periods.

One of the most prominent sites of this complex is the Ptolemaic temple of Hathor and Maat, which is also said to be one of the best-preserved examples of a temple from that period in Egypt.⁷⁴ Construction on the temple began in the 3rd century B.C.E. under Ptolemy IV Philopator (r. 222-205 B.C.E.) and was continued for the next 60 years under Ptolemy VI Philometor (r. 180-164, 163-145 B.C.E. – who was also the Ptolemaic king who enabled the

⁷⁰ If Bohak is correct in his analysis, *CPJ* 3.520 attests the native Egyptian's detestation of Onias and his temple; see G. Bohak, 'CPJ III, 520: The Egyptian Reaction to Onias' Temple', *JSJ* 36 (1995), pp. 32-41.

⁷¹ L. H. Lesko, *Pharaoh's Workers: The Villagers of Deir El Medina* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 7; see also M. L. Bierbrier, *The Tomb-Builders of the Pharaohs* (Cairo: The American University Press, 1982).

⁷² Lesko, *Pharaoh's Workers*, p. 2.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁷⁴ P. du Bourguet, *Le temple de Deir al-Médîna* (Cairo: IFAO, 2002).

foundation of the Temple of Onias) and Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II (r. 170-164, 145-116 B.C.E.).⁷⁵



FIGURE 1: The Ptolemaic Temple of Hathor and Maat at Deir el-Medina (photography courtesy of Warwick Barnard©)

In the present context, it is important to note that the temple's later construction phase also corresponds, chronologically, to the *floruit* of Onias and his temple-building efforts. The temple itself is located within a tall mud-brick enclosure wall, featuring stone gates (see figures 2 and 3). These features exactly match Josephus' description of the Temple of Onias in *B.J.* 7.

⁷⁵ D. Montserrat and L. Meskell, 'Mortuary Archaeology and Religious Landscape at Greco-Roman Deir el-Medina', *JEA* 83 (1997), pp. 182, 193-196; E. Lanciers, 'The Shrines of Hathor and Amenhotep in Western Thebes in the Ptolemaic Period', *Ancient Society* 44 (2014), pp. 105-125 (esp. pp. 114-115).



FIGURE 2: Mud-brick wall enclosure of the Ptolemaic Temple of Hathor at Deir el-Medina (photography courtesy of Gaspard Van Haver©)



FIGURE 3: Stone gate in the outside wall of the Temple of Hathor at Deir el-Medina (photographed by the author)

Accordingly, we may imagine that the *temenos* of the Temple of Onias looked much like that of the present example, the temple of Hathor from the Ptolemaic period. Whether or not the actual sanctuary resembled that of the temple of Hathor is difficult to assess. This, in fact, should be doubted, since, if we may attach credence to Josephus' report, the Oniad temple-building seems to have been taller than that of the Deir el-Medina temple (cf., fig. 1). The temple precincts, on the contrary, must have been quite similar to the latter temple, as the following sketch illustrates (fig. 4).⁷⁶

⁷⁶ This reconstruction of the Temple of Onias is provided courtesy of D. Gurtner and M. M. Piotrkowski (*Encyclopedia of Second Temple Judaism*); see Piotrkowski, 'Temple, Leontopolis (Archaeology)', pp. 760-762.

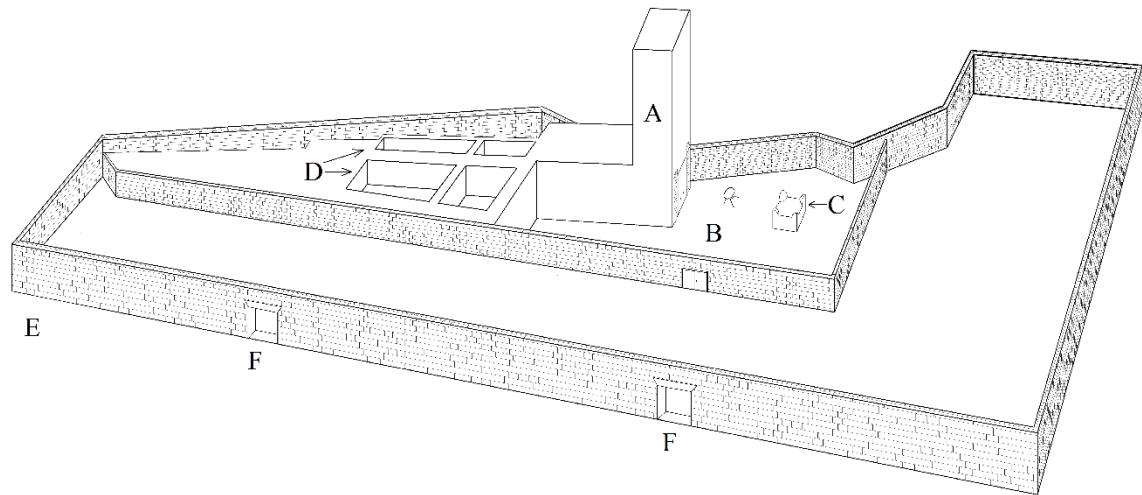


FIGURE 4: Suggested econstruction of the Temple of Onias

Josephus (in *B.J.* 7.427-430) records a structure that was built of huge stones (60 cubits in height), resembling a tower (fig. 4: A). It should be assumed that it also had a priestly court (fig. 4: B), an altar (fig. 4: C), and storage facilities (Figure 4: D). The entire precinct was surrounded by a mud-brick wall (fig. 4: E) with stone gates (fig. 4: F).

7 Conclusion

Our quest for the appearance of the Temple of Onias based on the description of Josephus in *B.J.* 7 has led us to look at another temple-edifice altogether, namely the Temple of Hathor and Maat in Deir el-Medina near Luxor. Also this shrine was built in the Ptolemaic period and its entire precinct was surrounded by a mud-brick wall with stone gates, which is precisely how Josephus describes the Oniad temple-precinct. Elsewhere, in *Antiquities* 13, Josephus mentioned that the Temple of Onias was, in fact, a refurbished and cleansed native Egyptian temple, rather than a shrine build from scratch and modelled on the Jerusalem Temple. The fact that Josephus' description seems to match perfectly the Temple of Hathor at Deir el-Medina only strengthens this assumption. However, while both temple precincts seem to have looked alike, the sanctuaries at both locations need not necessarily have been identical. In fact, we may attach credence to Josephus' report that Onias' sanctuary resembled a tower, indeed attempting to make the structure conform with Jewish sacral architecture he (i.e., Onias, a former Jerusalemite high priest) was familiar with the Jerusalem Temple (including a 60-cubit-high structure). Yet, while nothing certain can be said about the actual outside appearance of the Temple of Onias before its real vestiges are discovered and excavated, this study attempted

to shed some light on this mystery based on a literary analysis of our main source, Flavius Josephus, and on an archaeological parallel from Deir el-Medina.