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ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND TEXTUAL EVIDENCE FOR THE FUNCTION OF THE “BOTANICAL GARDEN” OF KARNAK IN THE INITIATION RITUAL *

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The so-called “Botanical Garden” of Karnak, located at the back of the Middle Kingdom temple of Amun, is the main sanctuary of a large religious complex named (Menkheperra-) *Akh-menu*,¹ which was built by Thutmose III between year 24 and the fourth decade of his reign, that is, after his coregency with Hatshepsut and after the famous Battle of Megiddo (Laboury 1998, 35–37). As has already been noticed by many scholars, this sanctuary is very unusual in many respects: in its architectural design, its dimensions, its decoration — in fact, everything in it seems exceptional. The present article aims to suggest an interpretation of these peculiarities by investigating the specific ritual meaning of this sacred space with the methodological apparatus developed in the context of the study of the “grammaire du temple” (Ph. Derchain), that is, by combining in the same approach the analysis of the architectural, textual, and iconographical features which together comprise the monument.

ARCHITECTURAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE “BOTANICAL GARDEN” OF KARNAK²

The complex studied here is composed of different sets of rooms (fig. 3.1):

- Three rooms on the axis of the main temple of Amun: two antechambers and a sanctuary (fig. 3.1:1);
- The “Botanical Garden” proper, with its own antechamber (fig. 3.1:3) leading into another secluded and very large sanctuary (fig. 3.1:4);
- And, to the east of the sanctuary, two rooms arranged on a north–south axis, which may have been connected with the corridor in the northern part of the *Akh-menu* (Carlotti 2001, 225, 243).

The double antechamber of the axial sanctuary was decorated with reliefs and statues typical for that kind of room: depictions on the walls of the king making offerings and being introduced into the sanctuary and into the divine world (Barguet 1962, 191–92; PM 2², 118–19), and statues of Thutmose III in the gesture of adoration (Laboury 1998, 167–75).³ The antechamber is, unusually, doubled because the axial sanctuary is duplicated by another one immediately to the south,⁴ the so-called “Alexander Sanctuary” — accessible only through the doubled antechamber and an intermediary vestibule — dedicated apparently to a divine form of the king or to the king as a manifestation of the god (Martinez 1989).⁵

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¹ On this monument, see Barguet 1962, 157–209, 283–99; Pecoil 2000; and Carlotti 2001.

² For a very detailed architectural analysis of the complex, see Carlotti 2001, 113–48.

³ For the function of this type of statue in the architectural and ritual context of a temple sanctuary, see Laboury 2000, 88–91.

⁴ This complementarity is expressed by architectural and decorative means (Carlotti 2001, 119). The conception of the *Akh-menu*, partly as a duplicate of the Middle Kingdom temple of Amun, might also have caused or at least influenced this doubling of the antechamber of the axial sanctuary since it is clear that this arrangement was already used in the temple of Sesostri I at Karnak; see Gabolde 1998, pl. 1; Carlotti 2001, 21.

⁵ This arrangement, uniting both divine and royal cults inside the axial sanctuary structure, is mirrored in the statue group sculpted in a naos

The function of the axial sanctuary itself is also clearly defined by its wall decoration, which illustrates the daily divine ritual (PM 2², 120). Fragments of a diorite statue of Thutmose III, probably originally holding a ritual stand or libation altar in front of him, were found in this room (Laboury 1998, 176–78), as well as pieces from a large square calcite base, provided with a frontal staircase (fig. 3.1:1), almost certainly intended to hold a tabernacle for a divine statue (Beaux 1990, 9–12; Carlotti 2001, 119).⁶ As Nathalie Beaux has perfectly stated, beyond this evident and normal use, the calcite base also allowed access to a hidden door, situated two cubits (1.05 m) above the ground at the eastern end of the northern wall of the sanctuary (fig. 3.1:2). This elevated door, which was probably not easily visible with the tabernacle in position, is the only entrance to the “Botanical Garden.” Thus, the axial sanctuary, which looks ostensibly like a normal, traditional sanctuary, appears in fact to have been a place of transition, giving access to an even more secret and sacred space, a sanctuary behind the visible and expected one, a real “holy of holies.”

The antechamber of this hidden and most sacred sanctuary (fig. 3.1:3), which is the first of the two rooms of the “Botanical Garden,” appears also as a place of transition, with a single means of access and two other doors providing entry to other rooms. The main door is, of course, the one that leads to the large sanctuary oriented along the north–south axis. Its importance was emphasized by its central position in the wall, carved into it and occupying more than half of its length, and by its very special and elaborate decoration, for which a few parallels exist, notably the one at the entrance of the Hathor sanctuary of the almost contemporaneous temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari (Barguet 1962, 199, n. 8; Beaux 1990, 16; Carlotti 2001, 128–29). The inner width of this door (1.82 m) is also quite exceptional and is further magnified by the enlarged space between the two columns in front of it (see the reconstruction in Carlotti 2001, 228–29). The whole decoration of the antechamber converges toward the monumental door leading to the sanctuary. Just opposite this door, on the south wall of the room, there is an interruption of the wall decoration of more than two meters (2.13 m), probably for a piece of now-vanished temple furniture (Beaux 1990, 18; Carlotti 2001, 127–28).

The antechamber itself is also unusual for its remarkable width (14.79/14.83 m), which explains — or was necessitated by — the presence of four large bundled *nḥb.wt*-columns aligned along the east–west axis. Between each outer pair of columns Auguste Mariette found in 1861 a sizeable royal sphinx of Thutmose III, now in front of the Cairo Museum (Laboury 1998, 179–83). These two sphinxes were discovered *in situ*,⁷ facing northward, that is, facing the sanctuary, a rather unusual position for that kind of sculpture.⁸ There was also an offering table positioned in front of each statue (now also in the Cairo Museum) and some kind of a dais on which, according to Nathalie Beaux (1990, 22), the priests could stand to be purified before entering the sanctuary.

The sanctuary (fig. 3.1.4) is also unusually large, with its very long side walls carved with eight niches, four on each side; six of these were later enlarged to accommodate not one but two divine statues (Beaux 1993; and more recently Carlotti 2001, 131–33). Including the spacious tabernacle on the axis of the room, there were no less than nine statue niches in this sanctuary. The lower part of a granite statue of Thutmose III holding a ritual stand or libation altar in front of him, probably similar to the one found in fragments in the axial sanctuary, was also discovered there (Laboury 1998, 184–85).

On the preserved lower parts of the walls of these two rooms were depicted extraordinary animals and plants (many of them native but teratological specimens), which explains the modern name given to this part of the *Akh-menu*, “the Botanical Garden of Thutmose III.” Two dedication texts carved in the antechamber disclose the information that the king would have found these unusual zoological and botanical phenomena in *Retjenu* and in the “God’s Land” and ordered them to be represented “in front of” (*m-bꜣḥ-ꜥ*) the god in year 25 of his reign (Beaux 1990, 38–46).⁹

that is the ritual focus of the eastern chapel, erected by Thutmose III in the girdle wall of the temple at the very back of the *Akh-menu*’s axial sanctuary, and which was intended for popular devotion as the sanctuary of the “hearing ear” (Laboury 1998, 199–205). Thus, this eastern chapel of Thutmose III appears as an early testimony of the royal provision for what Egyptologists today call “popular piety of the New Kingdom,” the pharaoh offering himself as an accessible and useful image of the god on earth for the peoples’ need for divine proximity.

⁶ This base was so large (2.365 m on each side and at least 1.05 m high) that it was unquestionably *in situ*, since, due to the narrow width

of the doors giving access to the sanctuary, it must have been put in position before the roof of the room was added (Carlotti 2001, 119).

⁷ Again, as with the calcite base in the axial sanctuary (cf. note 6), the sizes of these sphinxes assure that they were placed in the room before the roof was added; doubtless they were found in their original position (Laboury 1998, 180).

⁸ On the traditional positioning of sphinxes in Eighteenth Dynasty temple architecture, see Laboury 1998, 441–42.

⁹ From the “grammaire du temple” point of view, it must be noticed that symmetrically about the longest of these two dedication texts,

INTERPRETATION OF THE COMPLEX AS THE HOLY OF HOLIES

In her Ph.D. thesis, devoted to the study of these representations, Nathalie Beaux carefully analyzed each of these images and convincingly suggested that this architectural zone of Karnak was intended to be the sanctuary of Amun as the generator of life in all of its forms and aspects, a sanctuary that contained the mystery of life and creation (Beaux 1990). It represented the place and the actions of the *creatio perpetua* of the world, a theme deeply imbued with solar theology.

The so-called "Botanical Garden" is indeed a very peculiar sanctuary, physically isolated from the rest of the temple and thus very deeply sacred. It lies behind a first, traditional, axial sanctuary, as a secluded "holy of holies," a sanctuary behind the visible, normal sanctuary, accessible only via a concealed side door.¹⁰ Furthermore, the whole *Akh-menu* itself appears as a rather singular structure within the Karnak sacred precinct, added to the back of the venerable Middle Kingdom temple of Amun, partly as a duplicate of its inner structure (Barguet 1962, 283–99; Daumas 1980, 261–72; Carlotti 2001, 256).¹¹ The obviously elevated level of sacredness of the "Botanical Garden" is presumably a clue to the explanation of the very unusual (and still mostly unexplained) features of this complex, namely, its architectural design, its dimensions, its statuary program, and the rest of its decoration.

THE AKH-MENU AS THE PLACE FOR THE INITIATION RITUAL OF THE PRIESTS OF AMUN

Jean-Marie Kruchten has already shown in his study, "Les annales des prêtres de Karnak (XXI–XXIII^{mes} dynasties) et autres textes contemporains relatifs à l'initiation des prêtres d'Amon" (1989), that the initiation ritual at Karnak certainly took place in the *Akh-menu*. According to him, this ritual was probably performed in the *Heret-ib*, the so-called festival hall of the *Akh-menu*.

What do we know about this initiation ritual? László Kákósy has published a very interesting synthesis on this subject (1994), in which he points out the common features of all attestations of this ritual, from the earliest examples to the Coptic period (since some echoes of this ritual still occur in Coptic texts):

- *Place*: the initiation was always performed in the most sacred place of the temple, the holy of holies.
- *Symbolism*: the initiated symbolically leave this world to travel in the sky and learn its secrets; the symbolism of this revelation is thus always fundamentally solar and these mysteries are intended to explain the secrets concerning the forms and the destiny of the sun-god, as the supreme god and animator of the universe.
- *Culmination*: the culmination of the initiation is the possibility to see the god, or the visual revelation of the god through its statue, which appears to the initiated as the sun in the horizon, emerging from darkness.
- *Material Context*: the layout of the god's suite and the ordering of the furniture in it are used to explain the mysteries of the Beyond. To be enabled to see the god, the initiated must stand on a step or a small staircase, which is symbolically identified with the horizon (*ꜥḥ.t*), the celestial gateway between this world and the other one.

the one that precisely emphasizes these plants and animals as offerings to the god, lies the door that gives access to the set of rooms on the east of the sanctuary, which could have been used as an offering storage place (Carlotti 2001, 243).

¹⁰ This kind of layout is not absolutely unique. For instance, as Marcel Marée kindly pointed out to me, a similar architectural composition was used in the sanctuary structure of the temple of Amenhotep III at Luxor (Brunner 1977). In this second and hidden sanctuary at Luxor temple, the theme of the decoration is also fundamentally solar.

¹¹ The text on the southern façade of the *Akh-menu* seems to have emphasized the special status of this temple, added to the main temple of Amun (Gardiner 1952). In this badly damaged decree regarding the *Akh-menu* and its uniqueness, Thutmose III distinguishes, for example, the priests of this particular temple from all other priests of the estate of Amun, even if he stresses at the same time the integration of this new and special structure within the general functioning of the whole domain of Amun at Karnak (col. 63 of the text).

Furthermore, the references to the initiation ritual state that the candidate was supposed to travel the sky in order to reach the god's realm via the passage of the *ꜥḥ.t*-horizon. If, as suggested above, the four columns of the antechamber refer to the four cardinal corners of the world, they should have been positioned not on a line but as a square. Since a sizeable sphinx obstructed the passage between each outer pair of columns (fig. 3.1:3), the initiate had to go between the two central columns and, thus, to pass between the hindquarters of the two sphinxes in order to see the god in his sanctuary and to symbolically access the *ꜥḥ.t*-gateway between this world and the other. On the basis of these observations, we might consider the possibility that this deliberate architectural and sculptural composition is an example of the well-known principle of "rabattement" or folding back, very common in ancient Egyptian two-dimensional art but transferred here in three dimensions.¹⁴ If this hypothesis is correct, the initiate had to pass between the hindquarters of the two sphinxes, just as, in order to reach the beyond, it was necessary to clear a path between the two Aker(u)-lions or -sphinxes, positioned back to back, representing the *ꜥḥ.t*-horizon in ancient Egyptian cosmography (Hornung 1975, cols. 114–15).

This interpretation fits perfectly with what we know about the layout of the place of initiation, which was used to elucidate "the secrets of the luminous world of the gods." It also permits an explanation of why the four columns — if they indeed refer to the four cardinal corners of the world — were aligned on the east–west axis and why the two sphinxes of Thutmose III were arranged in such an atypical position.¹⁵

We know from numerous other textual references that, according to the Theban theology, Amun was identified with the sun-god as the creator, the supreme god and generator of life in any of its aspects (Assmann 1983; Gabolde 1998, 143–58). This syncretism is precisely what is made manifest in the architectural and decorative structure of the "Botanical Garden." Therefore we can presume that it was the core of the mysteries revealed to the initiated when led into this highly sacred place of Karnak precinct.

To conclude, I would like to add, on a more methodological and epistemological level, that, as Philippe Derchain and his followers have shown in their studies of the "grammaire du temple," it is obviously necessary to combine the analysis of the architecture, the images (statues and two-dimensional decoration), and the texts in order to try to understand the meaning of a sacred place (a temple or a tomb¹⁶) in ancient Egypt. Such studies have also demonstrated that the temple (or the tomb) is not just a petrified ritual space and that there is always a formal structuring which goes further, which is significant and which transforms the structure into a meaningful theater, interactive with the ritual itself, as here, in the "Botanical Garden" of Thutmose III.

¹⁴ Elsewhere I have shown that this principle was also in use in statuary, another three-dimensional art (Laboury 2000).

¹⁵ Another possible interpretation of the atypical position of these two sphinxes — less likely to me — is to suppose that they were understood as being not back-to-back but face-to-face, in another composition which seems also to allude to the rising of the sun, according to a fragmentary monument discovered in room XXXIII – SW1 of the *Akh-menu* and analyzed by P. Bargaet (1962, 202, n. 3).

One can of course wonder why ancient Egyptians positioned things one way if they were supposed to be (at least mentally) seen in another, or, in other words, why they did not position the sphinxes back-to-back in an explicit and unambiguous ordering. The answer appears rather simple. As I have shown with some examples of the

use of this "rabattement," or folding back, principle in statuary compositions, the point is to produce different levels of meaning with the same physical object (Laboury 2000, 91–92). So, here, the two sphinxes might represent the Aker- or *ꜥḥ.t*-gateway between the two parts of the cosmos, but, at the same time, as effigies of pharaoh, they face the god in his sanctuary and they may have received (or may have been supposed to give) offerings, by virtue of the two offering tables that were found close to them (*supra* and Laboury 1998, 180–81). They may also have protected the rising of the god, as on the monument studied by Bargaet. So the idea seems to be to enrich and increase the meaning of the icon.

¹⁶ For an example of "grammaire du temple" analysis of a tomb, see Laboury 1997.

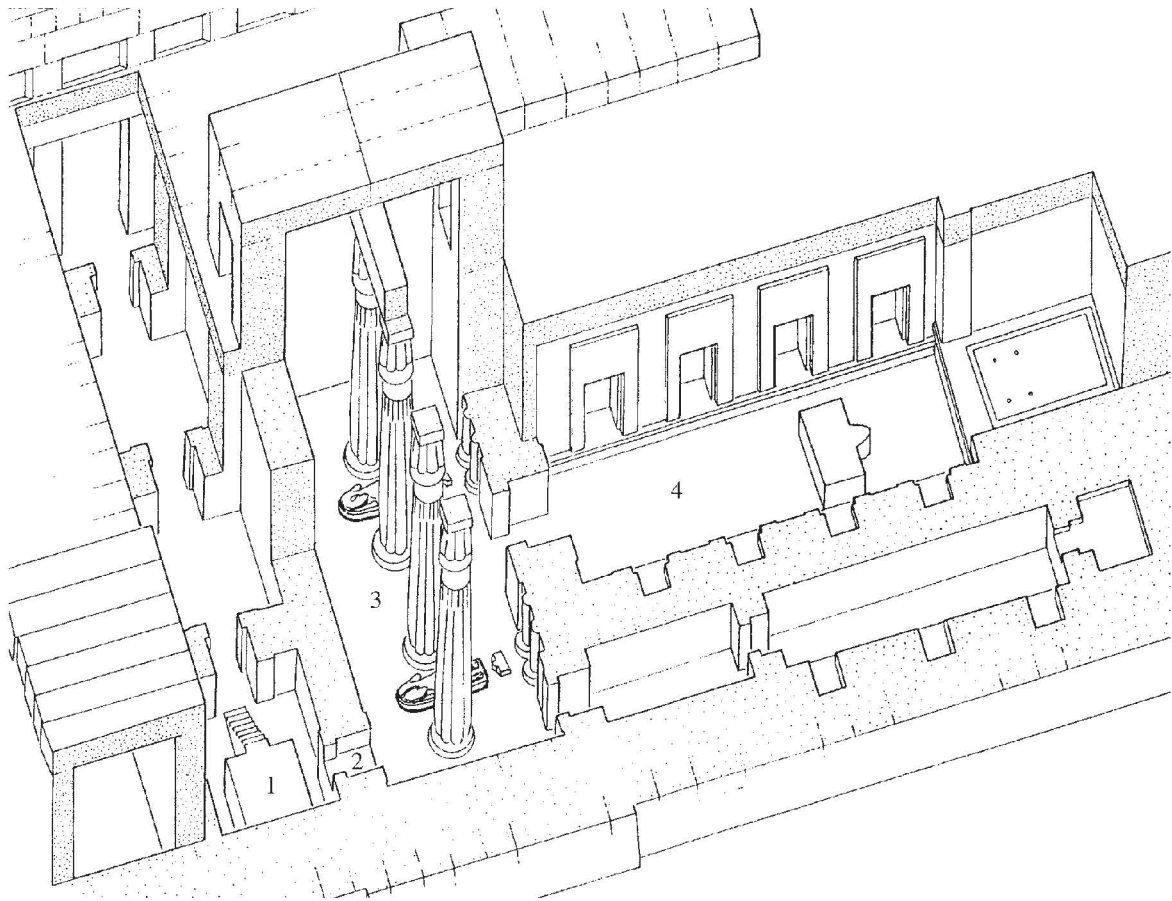


Figure 3.1. Layout of the Hidden Sanctuary of the *Akh-menu* of the So-called “Botanical Garden” of Thutmose III at Karnak (after Arnold 1992, p. 43)

ABBREVIATION

FNRS Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique

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