

SHIP OF THE GOD: THE *AMUN-USERHET* IN NEW KINGDOM EGYPT

A Thesis

by

MEGAN ELIZABETH COLLIER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Chair of Committee, Shelley Wachsmann  
Committee Members, Deborah Carlson  
Kevin Glowacki

Head of Department, Cynthia Werner

December 2013

Major Subject: Anthropology

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## ABSTRACT

The *Amun-Userhet* was a ship which played a crucial role in the development of religious thought in New Kingdom Egypt. The pharaoh and his entourage sailed down the Nile on its deck as part of a religious celebration called the Opet festival. This festival commemorated the annual renewal of the royal Ka and reinforced the order of the universe. This ship was the bridge between the human world and the divine.

No one has found any archaeological remains of the ship, but iconography, artifacts that would have adorned a miniature version of the *Amun-Userhet*, and written sources offer an accurate depiction. From this evidence we know that this ship was gilded and covered in precious gems. It also had a specific formula of symbols attached to it that can give us insight into its function in New Kingdom religion.

Through the review of the surviving iconography, artifacts, and written accounts of the *Amun-Userhet*, this thesis looks at the role this ship played in the development of New Kingdom religion. This ship was not only the bridge between the human and divine, but was also the bridge between the state religion of the Old and Middle Kingdom and the new idea of personal piety that arose in the New Kingdom.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair Dr. Shelley Wachsmann for the support and guidance he has shown me throughout the course of my work. I would also like to thank my committee, Dr. Deborah Carlson and Dr. Kevin Glowacki for their encouragement and direction.

To my friends and colleagues at Texas A&M I would like to offer my great appreciation for the wonderful time we spent both in and out of the classroom.

To my parents who provided immeasurable academic, emotional, and financial assistance I am profoundly grateful.

## NOMENCLATURE

*Amarna Period*- The reign of Ankhenaten (Amunhotep IV). He ruled for a short period toward the end of the XVIIIth dynasty.<sup>1</sup> During his reign he founded the monotheistic movement of Atenism and tried to destroy the priesthood of Amun. This only lasted a short period after which Tutankhamun re-established the traditional state religion.

*Amun-Userhet*- The ship of Amun.

*Aten*- The solar god Ankhenaten attempted to worship exclusively.


*Bau*- A negative force sent from a god which can cause a person misfortune, anxiety, guilt, or strange behavior.

*Ka*- The spirit which gives an individual life.

*Ma'at*- When italicized, it means truth, justice, or the right way to live. Having *Ma'at* mean that the order of the universe was not disrupted. When not italicized it refers to the goddess who was the physical embodiment of truth.

*Nomes*- Regional areas or cities usually represented by standards.

*Rekhy*- A glyph that represented the populace.

*Waas*- scepter- A symbol carried by Khonsu. Usually depicted as .

*Wife of Amun*- A poorly understood title given to a royal woman. She was a member of an order of priestesses who oversaw the estate of Amun and tended to his daily rituals.

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<sup>1</sup> For chronological information see Kitchen 1991.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE FESTIVAL OF THE OPET

Egypt's New Kingdom (Fig. 1) heralded a change in the way people interacted with their gods. While in the Old and Middle Kingdoms, small temples and local gods were the main focus of attention, in the New Kingdom religion focused on a hidden "aspect" kept in a temple and shown to the common people only at certain times of the year, usually during a festival.<sup>2</sup> The sacred boat, or boat shrine, was the most common example of a hidden "aspect." While gods sailing on ships and sacred boats date to very early in the Old Kingdom, the priests and pharaohs of the New Kingdom utilized these religious images in a very different way. The official state religion bestowed great riches and attention on these ships, the greatest of which was the *Amun-Userhet*.<sup>3</sup> This ship was made out of cedar and used to transport the sacred images of the gods of the Theban triad during festivals. It was gilded and decorated with precious stones. The *Amun-Userhet* (and its smaller portable version) played a key part in several festivals celebrated during the New Kingdom.

The iconography of the *Amun-Userhet* represented a public display melding divine power and royal authority. The symbols that consistently appear on this ship were a reminder that the pharaoh was given power through the god Amun-Ra. During the early New Kingdom this ship was a tangible reminder that the pharaoh was the sole intermediary between mortals and the gods. As ideas changed towards personal piety and the relationship between gods and men, the ship itself became the intermediary.

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<sup>2</sup> Kemp 2006, 249.

<sup>3</sup> Kemp 2006, 249.

<i>Predynastic period (prehistory)</i>		<i>New Kingdom</i>	
<i>About bc</i>		1550–1295	18th Dynasty
4000	Taso-Badarian period	1295–1186	19th Dynasty
3700	Naqada I (Amratian) period	1186–1069	20th Dynasty
3500–3000	Naqada II (Gerzean) period	<i>Late period i: 3rd Intermediate</i>	
<i>Archaic period (protodynastic)</i>		1069–945	21st Dynasty
3000–2840	1st Dynasty	945–715	22nd Dynasty (Libyan)
2840–2700	2nd Dynasty	818–715	23rd Dynasty (Libyan)
<i>Old Kingdom</i>		727–715	24th Dynasty (Libyan)
2700–2600	3rd Dynasty	780–656	25th Dynasty (Kushite)
2600–2500	4th Dynasty	<i>Late period ii: Saite/Persian</i>	
2500–2350	5th Dynasty	664–525	26th Dynasty
2350–2190	6th Dynasty	525–404	27th Dynasty (Persian Empire)
2190–2160	7th–8th Dynasties	404–399	28th Dynasty
<i>1st Intermediate period</i>		399–380	29th Dynasty
2160–2106	9th Dynasty	380–343	30th Dynasty
2106–2010	10th Dynasty	343–332	31st Dynasty (Persian Empire)
<i>Middle Kingdom</i>		<i>Graeco-Roman period</i>	
2106–1963	11th Dynasty	332–323	Alexander the Great
1963–1786	12th Dynasty	323–30	Ptolemaic Dynasty
<i>2nd Intermediate period</i>		30–AD 641	Roman and Byzantine age
1786–1633	13th Dynasty	AD 641	Arab conquest
1786–1602	14th Dynasty (W. Delta)		
1648–1540	15th Dynasty (main Hyksos)		
17th cent.	16th Dynasty (local Hyksos)		
1633–1550	17th Dynasty (Thebes)		

**Figure 1.** General Chronology of Ancient Egypt. From Kitchen 1991, pg. 206.

The iconography of this ship is best understood in the context of the Opet Festival. Before the iconography of the *Amun-Userhet* can be discussed, we must understand these images not just in the context of the festival, but also the architecture of the temples with which it was associated. The *Amun-Userhet* participated in other festivals during the year, but this thesis focuses on the Opet Festival. This celebration took place in Thebes, or modern day Luxor and was the longest and the most important event of the Theban festival calendar (Fig. 2).<sup>4</sup> It carried such significance to the people of Thebes that a possible continuation still exists in Luxor as a Muslim celebration, the

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<sup>4</sup> Bell 1997, 158.

moulid of Abu el-Haggag, during which a parade consisting of purpose-built boats on carts replicates aspects of the ancient Opet festival.<sup>5</sup>

The Opet festival was celebrated during the second month (*Paophi*) of the Inundation season. It started on the 15th or 19th day of the month and under Thuthmosis III it ran for 11 days, but by the reign of Ramesses III it was 27 days long.<sup>6</sup> The earliest recorded mention of the Opet festival comes from the XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty and the last mention of it is during the Roman period.<sup>7</sup> The main focus of the celebration was the procession of sacred images of the Theban triad from their regular home in the Karnak temple to the Luxor temple (Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> There the pharaoh (or a proxy) performed rituals in the temple after which the sacred statues were returned to the Karnak temple.<sup>9</sup> This procession included the barque shrines of Amun and later of Mut, Khonsu, and the pharaoh. Twenty-four priests carried each shrine on a palanquin and were accompanied by attendants, soldiers, fan-bearers, musicians, dancers, drummers, additional priests and priestesses singing hymns, ordinary citizens of Thebes, and in some cases, the pharaoh himself.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wachsmann 2002a; 2002b.

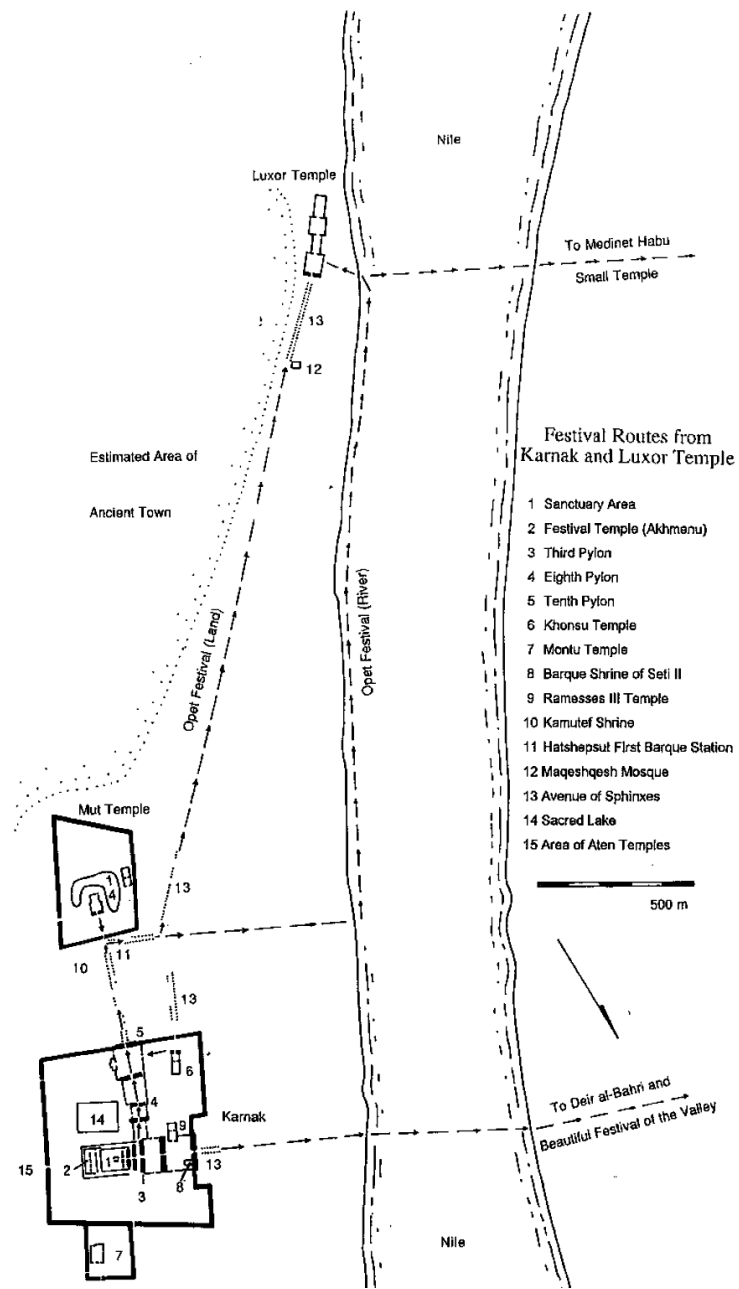
<sup>6</sup> Otto 1968, 100; Mysliwiec 1985, 19; Bell 1997, 158; Kemp 2006, 270.

<sup>7</sup> Otto 1968, 81; Mysliwiec 1985, 19; Darnell 2010, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Lanny Bell included an excellent map of the festival path in his 1997 publication. See Figure 2.

<sup>9</sup> Kemp 2006, 270.

<sup>10</sup> Canney 1938, 133-135.



**Figure 2.** Path of the Festival of Opet. From Bell 1997, pg. 159 fig. 65.

The main gods associated with the Opet festival were the Theban triad of Amun, Mut, and Khonsu. These three were local deities that gained a national following.

Amun was a relatively new god that had merged with the sun god Ra sometime during the early New Kingdom. He is first mentioned in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty, but probably existed at an earlier date. The Egyptians considered him as the “father, protector, and representative of the dynasty, but on the other hand as king of the gods and the world.”<sup>11</sup> The Amun worshiped at Luxor was also a fertility god, with both a ram-head and ithyphallic form.<sup>12</sup> After the reign of Ankhenaten, Amun took over some of Ra’s powers and his priests claimed that he was the creator of the world with no mother or father and who had birthed the rest of the gods. The priests of Amun also claimed that Thebes was the birthplace of the entire universe.<sup>13</sup>

Mut also appears as Amun’s wife during the XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty, but she had been worshiped much earlier.<sup>14</sup> Mut was a mother goddess: it is possible that she was the original god of Thebes and her status of wife of Amun was used to give the new god credibility.<sup>15</sup> Khonsu was the son of Amun and Mut.<sup>16</sup> He was a moon deity. He is frequently depicted as a youth wrapped in mummy-bandages holding a crook, flail and *was*-scepter. He was also considered to be an healer.<sup>17</sup>

Two other goddesses, Ma’at and Hathor, were associated with this festival, but in a much less explicit way than the Theban triad. The role of Ma’at will be discussed later in the chapter. Hathor was a multi-faceted goddess who was the patron of childbirth and

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<sup>11</sup> Otto 1968, 121; Allen 2005, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Darnell 2010, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Watterson 1996, 141.

<sup>14</sup> Kemp 2006, 269; Otto 1968, 95.

<sup>15</sup> Watterson 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Otto 1968, 96.

<sup>17</sup> Watterson 1996, 154.

seen as a protector of the pharaoh.<sup>18</sup> She is often depicted suckling the pharaoh and the ‘seven Hathors’ were said to have watched over children.<sup>19</sup> It is never discussed, but it is interesting to note that Hatshepsut, under whose reign the Opet festival gained the most significance, had a special relationship with Hathor that may have influenced her degree of participation in this festival.<sup>20</sup>

The procession of the sacred images from Karnak to Luxor and back changed very little in the years this festival was celebrated. What we know about this festival mostly comes from the walls of the Karnak and Luxor Temples. Hatshepsut was the first pharaoh to record the path of the festival, but it was actually Amenhotep III who “first formed an architectural unity” between Karnak and Luxor.<sup>21</sup> In Hatshepsut’s time the procession travelled to Luxor from Karnak by land, pausing at six way-stations during the course of the journey.<sup>22</sup> The procession returned to Karnak temple by way of the Nile on large barges. By the end of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty, each deity had an individual boat that was towed by smaller vessels. The pharaoh also had his own ship which towed the *Amun-Userhet*, even though the pharaoh travelled on the ship of the Amun.<sup>23</sup> The end of the festival came when priests carried the portable barque back to the inner sanctuary of the temple.

It is impossible to discuss the Opet festival in any depth without considering the two temples that were the focal points for beginning, apex, and end of this important

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<sup>18</sup> Watterson 1996, 119.

<sup>19</sup> Watterson 1996, 120.

<sup>20</sup> For Hatshepsut’s connection with the Opet Festival, see Darnell 2010; Murnane 1979.

<sup>21</sup> Quirke 1992, 77.

<sup>22</sup> Mysliwiec 1985, 20; Quirke 1992, 80; Darnell 2010, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Kemp 2006, 270; Darnell 2010, 2.

holiday. Both were designed, like all Theban temples, with processions and festivals in mind. The temples' design highlighted the passage to and from the sanctuary, which seems to be an innovation during the New Kingdom.<sup>24</sup> This represented a major change from the Old Kingdom when temples were square buildings built on the outskirts of settlements. By the New Kingdom, these structures had morphed into monumental statements of theology and power that dwarfed the people who lived in their shadow.<sup>25</sup> Karnak and Luxor were not meant to be seen only during holidays. They were built in the center of Thebes where people must have been able to see the reliefs carved and painted on the walls- a daily physical reminder of the buildings' purpose.

The Middle Kingdom temple at Karnak was very different from the structures that remain today. The old temple consisted of a single rectangular sanctuary which was enlarged during the reign of Amenhotep I.<sup>26</sup> During the New Kingdom, mostly due to the efforts of Amenhotep III and Ramses II, the temple of Karnak expanded to include three distinct sections within its grounds (Fig. 3). The complex of Amun is at the center with the sacred site of Mont to the north and the temple of Mut to the south.<sup>27</sup> The design of the innermost sanctuary dates to the reign of Tuthmosis III, but the actual remains left today (including the boat shrines) date to the reign of Philip Arrhidaeus, the brother of Alexander the Great.<sup>28</sup> The temple was not completely abandoned until the fourth century C.E.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Quirke 1992, 76.

<sup>25</sup> Kemp 2006, 248.

<sup>26</sup> Quirke 1992, 76.

<sup>27</sup> Otto 1968, 86.

<sup>28</sup> Otto 1968, 88.

<sup>29</sup> Watterson 1996, 139.

From a practical viewpoint, the Temple of Karnak was where the portable barques of Amun, Mut, and Khonsu were kept when they were not in use. From a more metaphorical and spiritual angle, Karnak was the home of Amun.<sup>30</sup> The statue of the god, which the ancient Egyptians thought was imbued with the spirit of the god, lived at Karnak. The priests removed the god only during festivals. The god was never completely on display for the populace, but was always concealed by a shrine which was in turn sometimes covered in a veil.

The temple of Luxor had a less complex and lengthy building history. Amenhotep III, Tutankhamun, and Ramesses II built the majority of the structure. In relation to Karnak, Luxor was built in a relatively short period of time. Its construction lasted only 150 years.<sup>31</sup> The axis of Luxor temple parallels the Nile which also parallels the processional path to Karnak.<sup>32</sup> This would suggest that unlike Karnak, Luxor existed for the sole purpose of participation in the Opet festival. Amenhotep III completed the construction of the temple at Luxor, but due to the Amarna interlude, it was Tutankhamun who commissioned the reliefs seen today on the temple walls.<sup>33</sup> The temple is actually two smaller temples combined (Fig. 4). The smaller of the two is dedicated to a form of Amun called Amenemopet of Luxor, who is poorly understood. The larger section of Luxor was built to accommodate the sacred barque of Amun and the procession surrounding it during the Opet festival.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Otto 1968, 89.

<sup>31</sup> Quirke 1992 pg 88; Bell 1997, 147.

<sup>32</sup> Bell 1997, 158.

<sup>33</sup> Epigraphic study 1994, xvii.

<sup>34</sup> Bell 1997, 179.



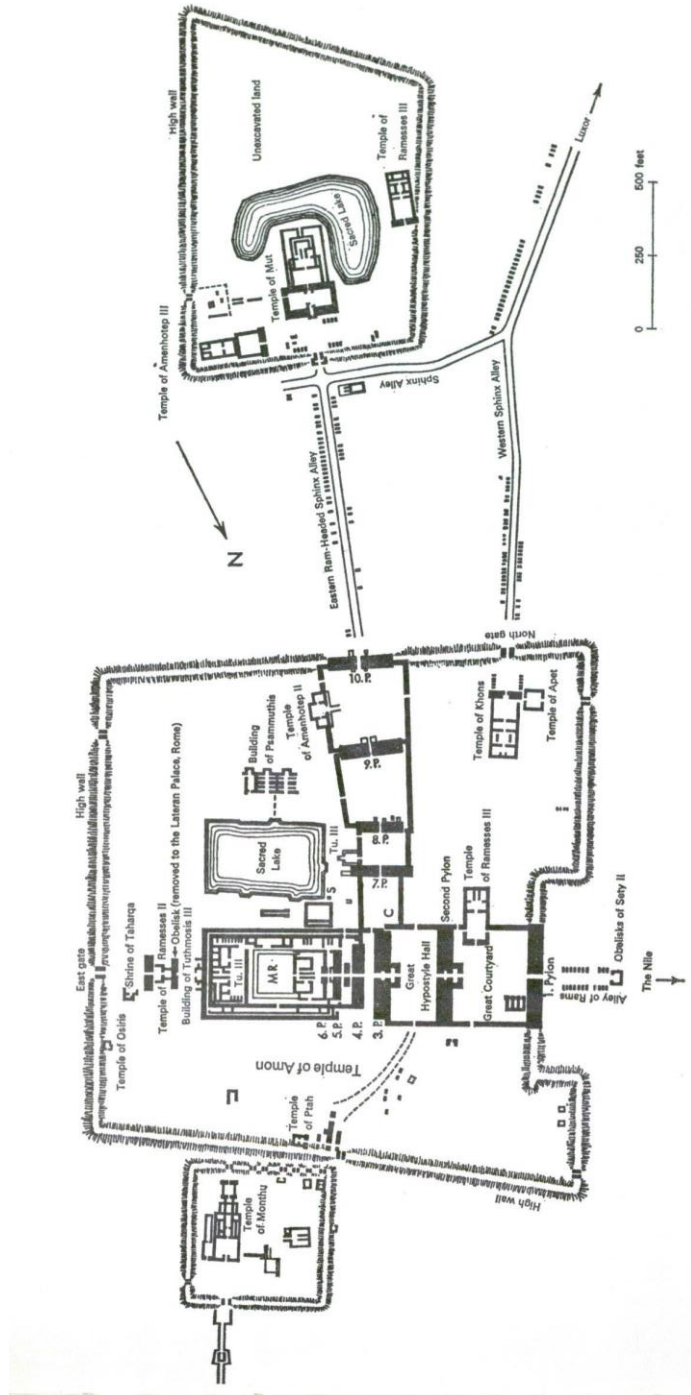


Figure 3. Plan of Temple of Karnak. From Otto 1968, pg. 87 fig. 10.

There is some evidence that suggests a building dedicated to the cult of the king existed at Luxor during the early XVIII<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, probably from the reign of Hatshepsut or Thutmose III.<sup>35</sup> But this evidence would support the idea that Luxor had always been a site dedicated to the role of the King in the Opet festival. Amenhotep III inscribed the walls of Luxor with the description “his place of justification, in which he is rejuvenated; the palace from which he sets out in joy at the moment of his appearance, his transformations visible to all.”<sup>36</sup>

These temples were not analogous to a modern church, mosque, or synagogue. The temple was a meeting place where the divine contacted the human and in the case of Luxor, this meeting imbued the human pharaoh with the power of a god.<sup>37</sup> This, however, only applied to the pharaoh. The temple did not provide direct communication with the divine for the common people. They contacted the divine at times when their cult statues were transported in their portable shrines, as discussed below.

To the populace of Egypt, the temple was a device used to produce the power needed to preserve societal order and keep the universe in balance. This meant that the priests utilized a technical religious knowledge denied to the populace in order to keep the cycle of life functioning.<sup>38</sup> The temples at Karnak and Luxor were prime examples of how these machines functioned and the Opet festival was the lynch pin of the entire system. According to Kemp, “Ideology needs architecture for its fullest expression.”<sup>39</sup>

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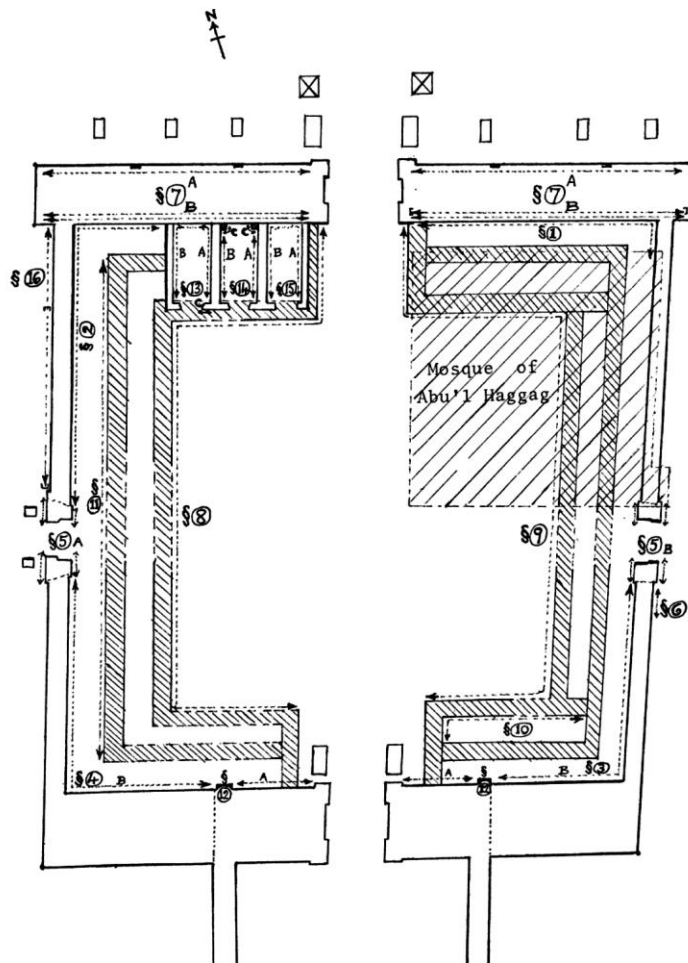
<sup>35</sup> Bell 1997, 147.

<sup>36</sup> Kemp 2006, 272.

<sup>37</sup> Otto 1968, 94; Bell 1997, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Quirke 1992, 70.

<sup>39</sup> Kemp 2006, 248.



**Figure 4.** Modern Plan of Luxor. From El-Razik 1974, pg. 143.

In this case, both temples enhanced the experience of the procession. They were built specifically to allow processions to flow through and between them. This put the portable barques, and in turn the *Amun-Userhet*, at the literal and metaphorical heart of these celebrations.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Kemp 2006, 249, 252; Wachsmann 2013, 102.

The purpose of the Opet festival wasn't well understood until recently. In earlier publications, Egyptologists categorized this celebration as a simple new year's festival. As more evidence was found and new artifacts were discovered, scholars reclassified it as a fertility or marriage festival.<sup>41</sup> Today, scholars know it to be a complex conglomeration of all these things and more. As L. Bell states "The cosmic significance of the Opet festival was tremendous. Beyond its role in the cultus of the king, it secured the regeneration of the Creator, Amun of Luxor, the rebirth of Amun-Re of Karnak, and the re-creation of the cosmos."<sup>42</sup> The fertility aspect of the festival was not simply about rebirth, it was about the continuing cycle of the universe.

The Egyptian people saw the pharaoh as Amun's earthly envoy and vessel of divine power.<sup>43</sup> During the Opet festival, the pharaoh renewed his connection with the god and his source of divine power. This source was called a *Ka*. Every Egyptian could claim a *Ka*, which came from a mythic divine ancestor. The Egyptians describe the *Ka* much the same as people today talk about vitality or will power, but instead of it coming from within them, the *Ka* was transient and passed from descendant to descendant in each family or lineage.<sup>44</sup> The difference between the *Ka* of a pharaoh and the *Ka* of a normal human was essentially that the *Ka* of common people was never depicted. The royal *Ka* came directly from the gods and each pharaoh inherited it upon ascending the throne.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Canney 1938, 145.

<sup>42</sup> Bell 1997, 157.

<sup>43</sup> Bell 1997, 157.

<sup>44</sup> Frankfort 1978, 63.

<sup>45</sup> Bell 1997, 131.

In one instance in Hatshepsut's mortuary temple at Deir El Bahari, the *Ka* of the queen seems to have been elevated to the equal of gods. On several pillars pairs of dieties are depicted embracing Hathor, two of which are Amun and the queen's *Ka*.<sup>46</sup> While this *Ka* came from the same source for every pharaoh, each individual inherited his (or her in the case of Hatshepsut) own piece. It was seen as a fragment of the whole royal *Ka* which was only granted to the gods, the pharaoh, or a future pharaoh.<sup>47</sup> These fragments were believed to be a continuum that extended back through the ages to the time when the gods themselves ruled the land. The royal *Ka* was indestructible and supplied the pharaoh with the power to rule and, thus, legitimacy.<sup>48</sup>

The idea that this legitimacy could be passed down by the god was used by several pharaohs to validate their own right to rule. Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, and Horemheb all claimed Amun revealed himself or spoke to them, telling them that they were to be the next pharaoh.<sup>49</sup> In some of these cases, a ship shrine was used as the vessel through which Amun communicated.<sup>50</sup>

The Opet festival was an immensely important celebration for New Kingdom Egyptians both on a state and individual level. Since this holiday focused on the renewal of the royal *Ka*, the consequences of performing the rituals incorrectly affected not only the order of the cosmos but also the daily lives of ordinary citizens. The pharaoh was the connection between the human and divine in Egypt. The purpose of the Opet festival

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<sup>46</sup> Frankfort 1978, 69.

<sup>47</sup> Bell 1997, 140; Kemp 2006, 272.

<sup>48</sup> Kemp 2006, 272.

<sup>49</sup> Otto 1968, 100; Watterson 1996, 141.

<sup>50</sup> See pg. 61 for a more in depth discussion.

was to renew this connection annually to reinforce the idea that the king was the mediator between the gods and the rest of Egypt. This connection to the divine gave the pharaoh the right to rule.<sup>51</sup> Horemheb combined his coronation with the celebration of the Opet festival and named his son the crown prince of Egypt.<sup>52</sup> This connection was also part of a cycle that ensured the continuation of the world and everything in it. The official state religion relied on this performance acted out by the pharaoh and the gods to promote state control.<sup>53</sup>

In a less abstract, but no less important way, the festival provided a distraction from everyday life. People love a good spectacle, and the Opet did not disappoint in this regard. Like today, processions make people more amicable towards their rulers.<sup>54</sup> The lavish decorations of the ship, as well as its size and aura of mystery, were a physical reminder of the state's control. When people took part in this procession, it reinforced the dominance the temples had over their lives.<sup>55</sup>

On an individual level, this was when the populace was able to form a connection with the divine. The level of connection and the part the pharaoh played in it changed over time due to the spread of the idea of personal piety.<sup>56</sup> The god communicated (almost) directly through oracles, which took place during the festival procession. This

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<sup>51</sup> Mysliwiec 1985,10.

<sup>52</sup> Kemp 2006, 273; Murnane 1979, 23; Canney 1938, 146.

<sup>53</sup> Teeter 2011, 57; Kemp 2006; 270; Hill and Schorsch 2007, 24.

<sup>54</sup> Kemp 2006, 252.

<sup>55</sup> Kemp 2006, 252.

<sup>56</sup> See chapter 5.

evolved from the processions of the early XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty and became extremely popular during the late New Kingdom.<sup>57</sup>

The *Amun-Userhet* played both an obvious and complex function in this festival. In the most practical sense, the ship served to transport the god from Luxor to Karnak. The portable boat-shrine, the pharaoh, and a retinue of priests travelled down the Nile on the return trip to Karnak after the pharaoh performed the rituals at Luxor.<sup>58</sup> During the reign of Hatshepsut, only Amun possessed his own ship. The portable shrines of Mut, Khonsu, and the pharaoh all journeyed on the *Amun-Userhet*. By the reign of Tutankhamun Mut and Khonsu had acquired their own ships, which accompanied Amun's down the Nile.<sup>59</sup>

At a deeper level, the *Amun-Userhet* was a physical reminder of the connection between the gods and humanity. If temples were miniature universes allowing the gods to interact with humans, the *Amun-Userhet* was a microcosm of the temple where the common people interacted with the divine through the royal emissary.

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<sup>57</sup> Hill and Schorsch 2007, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Mysliwiec 1985, 20.

<sup>59</sup> Darnell 2010, 3.

## CHAPTER II

### OVERVIEW OF THE DEPICTIONS OF THE *AMUN-USERHET*

The idea that gods voyaged on ships is a very old one in Egypt. Depictions of Ra journeying on his ships throughout the course of the day date back to the Old Kingdom.<sup>60</sup> Since Amun had fused with Ra in the pantheon of gods in the New Kingdom, his association with ships would have been a logical extension of his older form.<sup>61</sup> The *Amun-Userhet* was in fact the most visible and powerful symbol of Amun-Ra. While the temple of Karnak would also serve as a reminder of Amun's power, it was the *Amun-Userhet* and its smaller twin with which the people interacted. The temple was not meant to provide an environment in which the people met the god; this role was reserved for the ships. The vessel's image appeared on temples to reinforce the idea that the temples and the Opet festival were tools used to preserve the order of the universe and to prolong the cycle of life.

The study of iconography can help further the understanding of complex religious ideas that may not be expressed, for whatever reason, in texts. As with all forms of information there are drawbacks. The ancient Egyptians did not always use their artwork to depict reality. The artwork was often used to depict ideals or abstract concepts.<sup>62</sup> The ancient Egyptians also did not use "geometric perspective"- the technique that western artists employ to depict distance and depth in two-dimensional

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<sup>60</sup> Albright 1918, 142.

<sup>61</sup> Faulkner and Allen 2005, 83.

<sup>62</sup> Robins 1994, 4.



art.<sup>63</sup> When studying Egyptian art one must always be careful to avoid taking it too literally. Fortunately, there is good evidence to support the idea that the actual *Amun-Userhet* closely resembled the ship that is illustrated. In some cases, parts of the portable barque shrine have survived and look exactly as they are depicted in the iconography (Fig. 5).



**Figure 5.** A sphinx standard from a portable shrine. From Hill and Schorsch 2007, pg. 107.

The depictions of the *Amun-Userhet* change only slightly over the course of years. There are some minor additions and subtractions, but the ship itself and the major details of the iconography change very little from its first appearance during the reign of

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<sup>63</sup> Robins 1994, 1; Schafer 1974, 19.

Hatshepsut to its last during the reign of Philip Arrhidaeus.<sup>64</sup> Each detail and decorative motif included on images of the *Amun-Userhet* was a deliberate choice and carried great meaning. In the great halls of the temples in which the ship appears in, the placement of the scene as well as its composition complements adjoining or facing scenes.

This is what modern Egyptologists call the ‘grammar of the temple.’<sup>65</sup> Each scene or panel in a temple corresponded to scenes on walls located across and diagonally to it. The images of the *Amun-Userhet*, the majority of which come from temples, were not simply decorations or even narratives of events. The depictions stood as a day-to-day substitute for the actual rituals that were celebrated once a year. These images of the *Amun-Userhet* allowed the world to function between the times of the Opet festival.<sup>66</sup>

In this chapter I will look at the individual components that make up the very specific formula for decorating the *Amun-Userhet*. The only surviving depictions of the *Amun-Userhet* predating the Amarna period are the depictions on the “Chapelle Rouge” at Karnak and reliefs from the temple at Deir el-Bahari (Fig. 6 and 7). Both of these date to the reign of Hatshepsut.<sup>67</sup> After the Amarna period, there are a greater number of images, the latest of which dates to Philip Arrhidaeus. According to W. Murnane, there are only sixteen depictions of the *Amun-Userhet* which have survived to modern times.<sup>68</sup> Of these sixteen, five are only fragments or so badly degraded that nothing further can be determined (Fig. 8-10). For this chapter, I discuss the 11 remaining examples.

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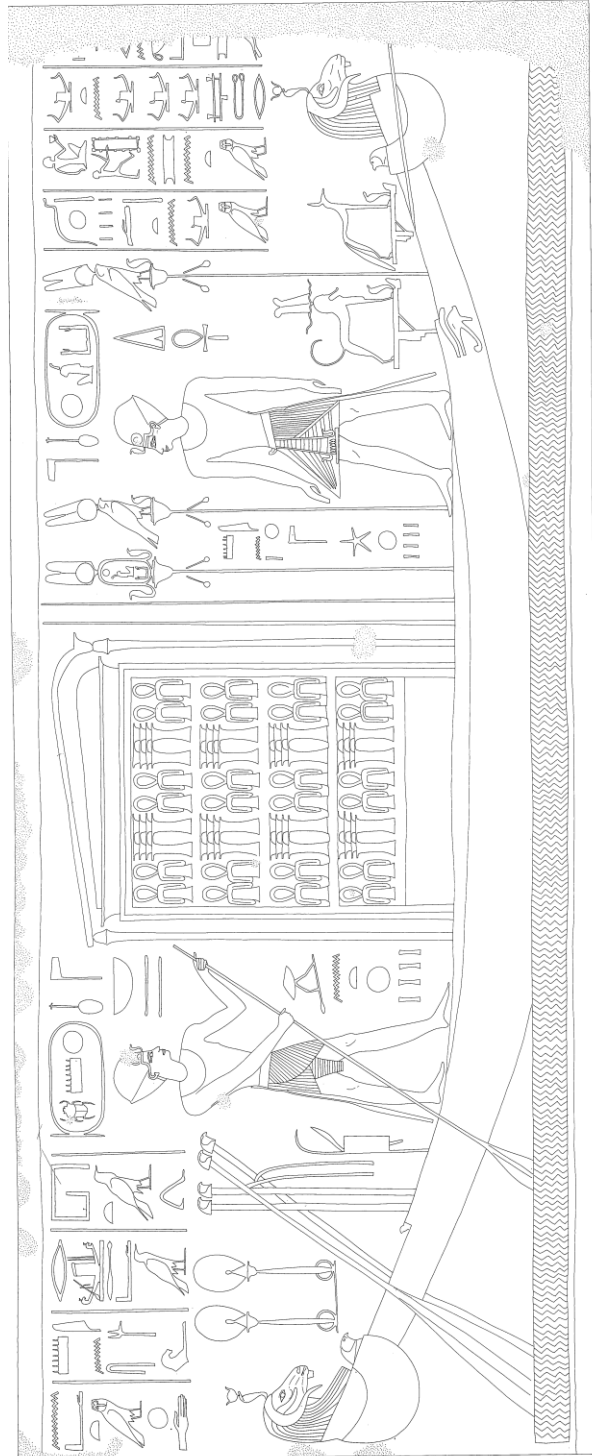
<sup>64</sup> Murnane 1979, 18.

<sup>65</sup> Quirke 1992, 80.

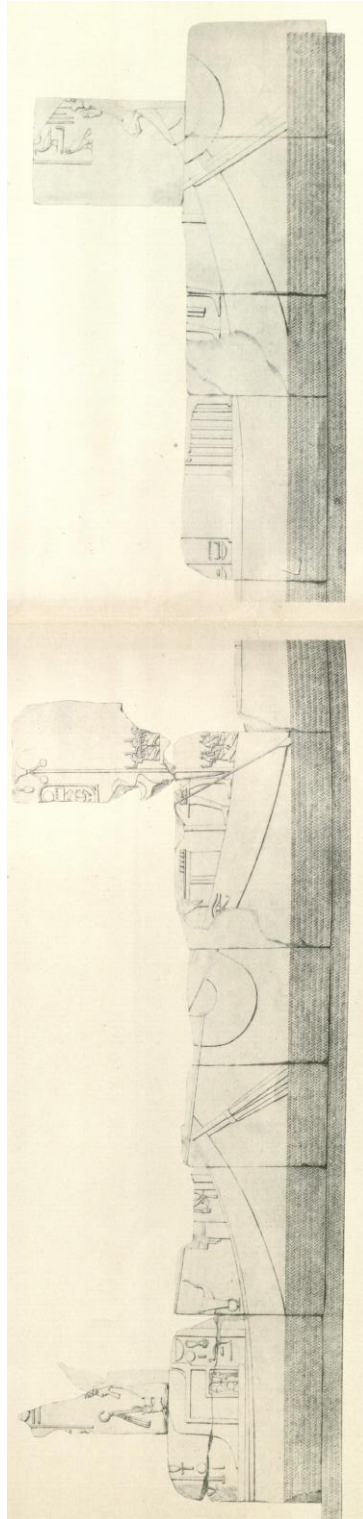
<sup>66</sup> Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004, 99.

<sup>67</sup> Mysliwiec 1985, 19.

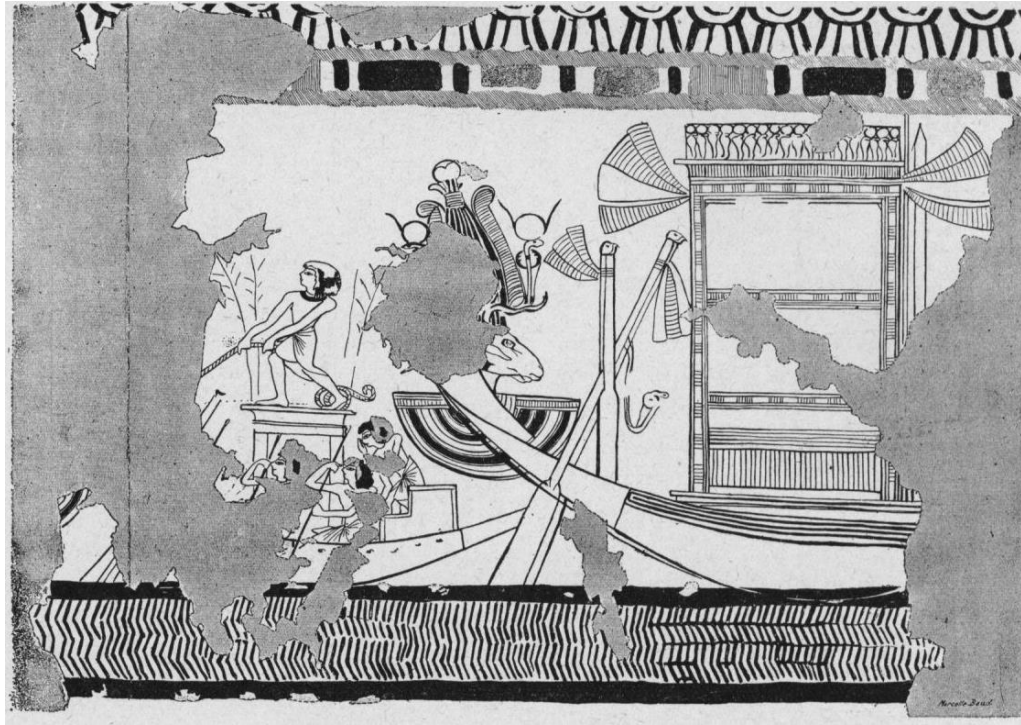
<sup>68</sup> Murnane 1979, 14.



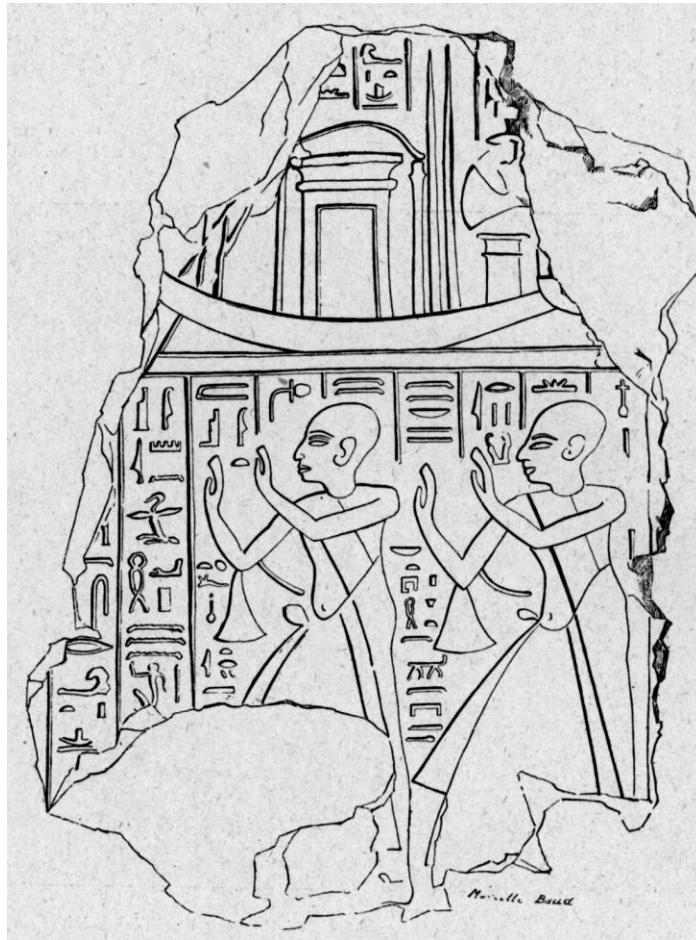
**Figure 6.** Depiction of the *Amun-Userhet* from the Chappelle Rouge, which dates to the reign of Hatshepsut. From Burgos and Larché 2006, pg. 60.



**Figure 7.** The *Amun-Userhet* from Deir El Bahari. From Naville 1908, pl. CXXII.



**Figure 8.** Stern of the *Amun-Userhet* dating to the XIX<sup>th</sup> dynasty depicted in Theban Tomb No. 19 at Dra Abul-Nagga. It is unclear to which pharaoh's reign this tomb dates.  
From Foucart 1922, pl. 14.



**Figure 9.** Fragment from Deir el Medina showing the mid-section of the *Amun-Userhet* with the cabin. Possibly dates to the XX<sup>th</sup> dynasty. From Foucart 1922, fig.7.



**Figure 10.** Depiction of a very schematic *Amun-Userhet* approaching a quay from the Mut complex at Karnak. The exact provenience of this fragment is debatable, but it most likely dates from the Third Intermediate Period. From Benson 1899, pl. XXII fig. 4.

The study of the iconography of the *Amun-Userhet* is complicated by the almost identical symbols used in the depictions of the portable barque. Because of this, some authors do not make a clear distinction between the Amun-Userhet and its smaller twin.<sup>69</sup> The iconography is also complicated by the fact that like most monuments of Egypt, new pharaohs would attempt to take credit for their predecessor's work by replacing the older pharaoh's name with their own. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in Luxor during the reign of Horemheb who attempted to suppress the name of

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<sup>69</sup> Otto 1968; Černý 1962; Blackman 1925.

Tutankhamun.<sup>70</sup> He seems to have limited himself to only erasing the name Tutankhamun while leaving the rest of the reliefs complete.<sup>71</sup>

The Amarna period also contributes to the difficulties in studying the iconography of the *Amun-Userhet*. The poor preservation of some of the original iconography associated with the Opet festival is due in part to Akhenaten's systematic destruction of anything associated with Amun.<sup>72</sup> The main monuments were of course restored by later pharaohs, but very little remains of the early iconography of the Opet festival.

All known examples of the *Amun-Userhet* share the same basic design elements. The hull of the ship curves upward at the bow and stern, which are capped with finials in the shape of a ram's head. The ship has two quarter rudders controlled by two helmsmen and is depicted being towed by another ship, usually the ship of the pharaoh (Fig. 11). On the deck is a structure which contains the portable barque shrine (itself a miniature of the ship on which it sits) that holds the image of the god. Surrounding the structure are many figures. The pharaoh is often depicted making offerings to the shrine. Ma'at, Hathor, and the Souls of Pe and Nekhen are also depicted on board. *Djed* pillars, a Sphinx, as well as several other standards are shown on deck. All of these elements reflect the purpose of the *Amun-Userhet*: to merge the power of Amun-Ra with the living pharaoh.

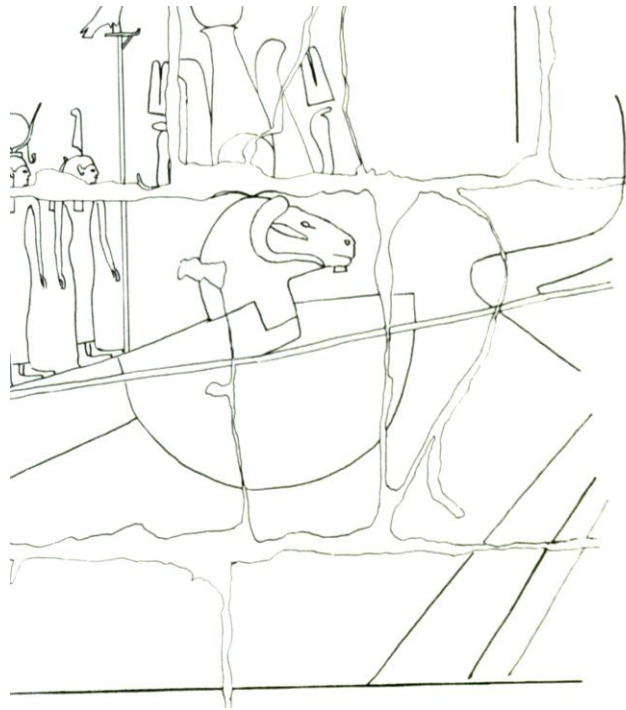
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<sup>70</sup> Murnane 1979, 16.

<sup>71</sup> Epigraphic study 1994, xix.

<sup>72</sup> Mysliwiec 1985, 4.





**Figure 11.** Bow of *Amun-Userhet* dating to the reign of Ramesses II with tow-line connecting to the stern of the royal ship. After Nelson 1981, pl. 38.

### **Hull Decorations**

The bow and stern of the ship are adorned with finials in the shape of rams' heads wearing an uraeus. The Uraeus was a symbol of kingship, which the pharaohs wore on their crown, and a symbol of Wadjet, the cobra goddess who watched over and protected the pharaohs of ancient Egypt (Fig. 12).<sup>73</sup> The ram was the sacred animal of Amun who was often depicted with a ram's head. The hull itself was decorated with precious metals and gems.<sup>74</sup> In some depictions of the ship, the hull retains fragments

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<sup>73</sup> Frankfort 1978, 131.

<sup>74</sup> Mysliwiec 1985, 20; Partridge 1996, 68.

of its original paint, which is yellow, supporting the texts that describe the hulls as covered in gold leaf.<sup>75</sup>



**Figure 12.** Ram's head finial dating to the reign of Ramesses II. After Nelson 1981, pl. 38.

The Wadjet eye is also frequently depicted on the hull (Fig. 13). The eye is a representation of the goddess Wadjet, daughter of the sun god Ra. She is the protector of the royal line and the Egyptians thought her form would strike down any enemy of the pharaoh.<sup>76</sup> This is not a typical decoration on Nile riverine craft. The best parallel we have comes from the boat on which the sun god voyaged during his nocturnal journey (Fig. 14).<sup>77</sup>

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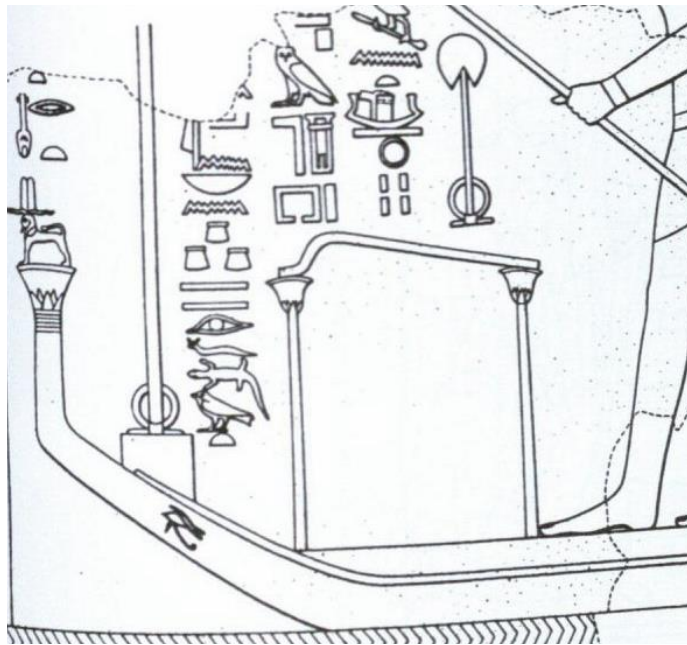
<sup>75</sup>Karlshausen 2009, 158.

<sup>76</sup>Frankfort 1978, 131.

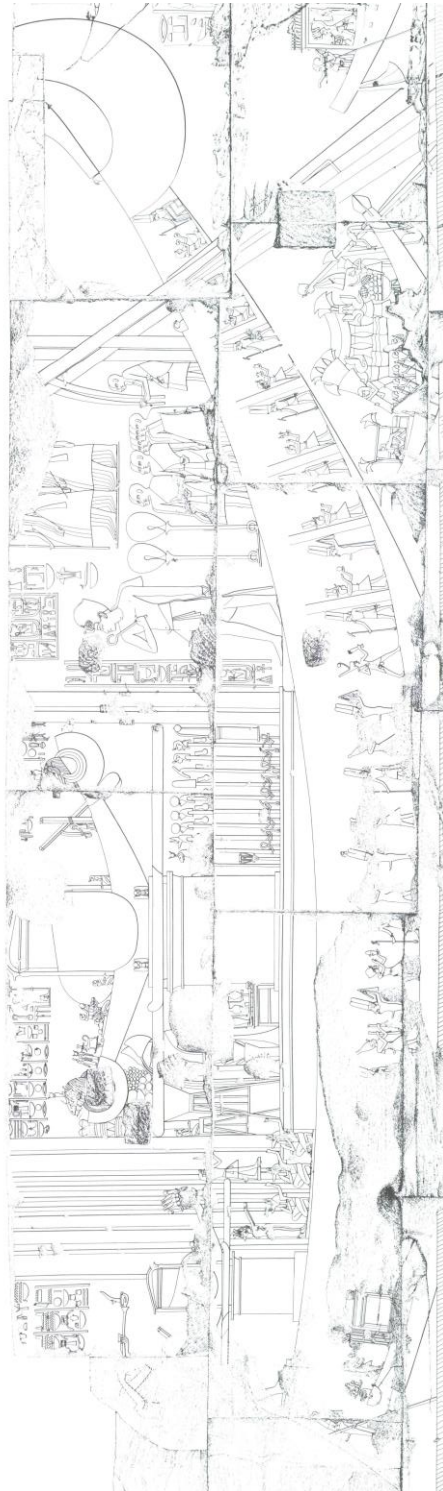
<sup>77</sup>Karlshausen 2009, 158; Thomas 1956, 65.



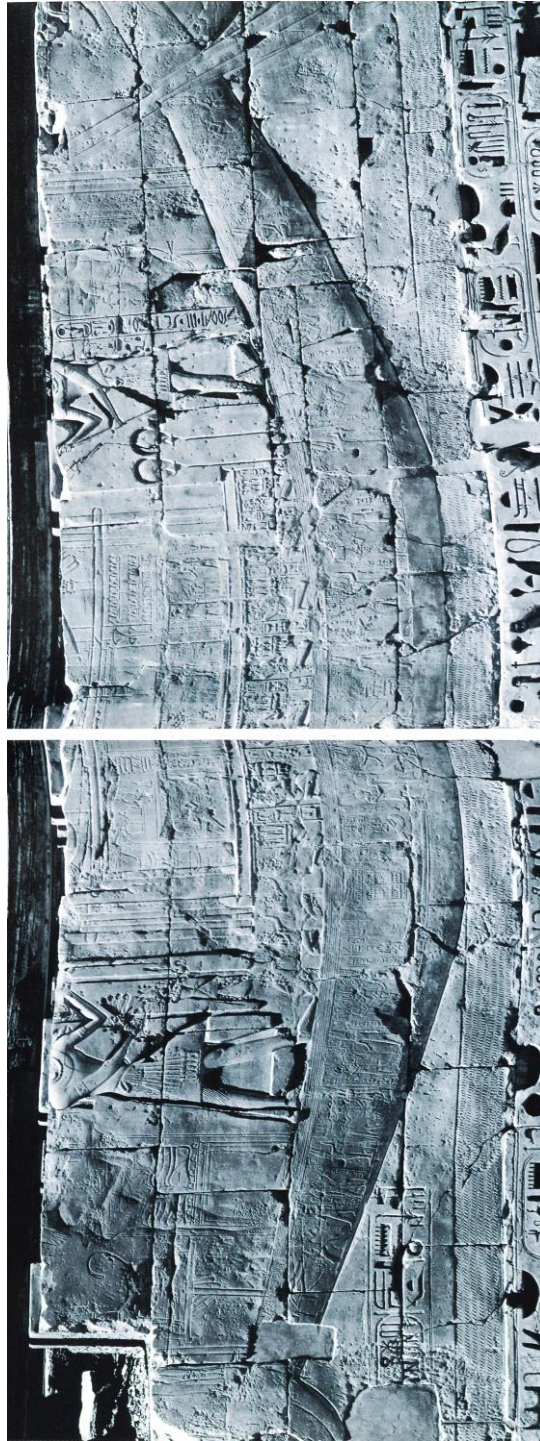
**Figure 13.** Sphinx standard and Wadjet eye on the bow of the *Amun-Userhet* dating to the reign of Ramesses II. After Nelson 1981, pl. 38.



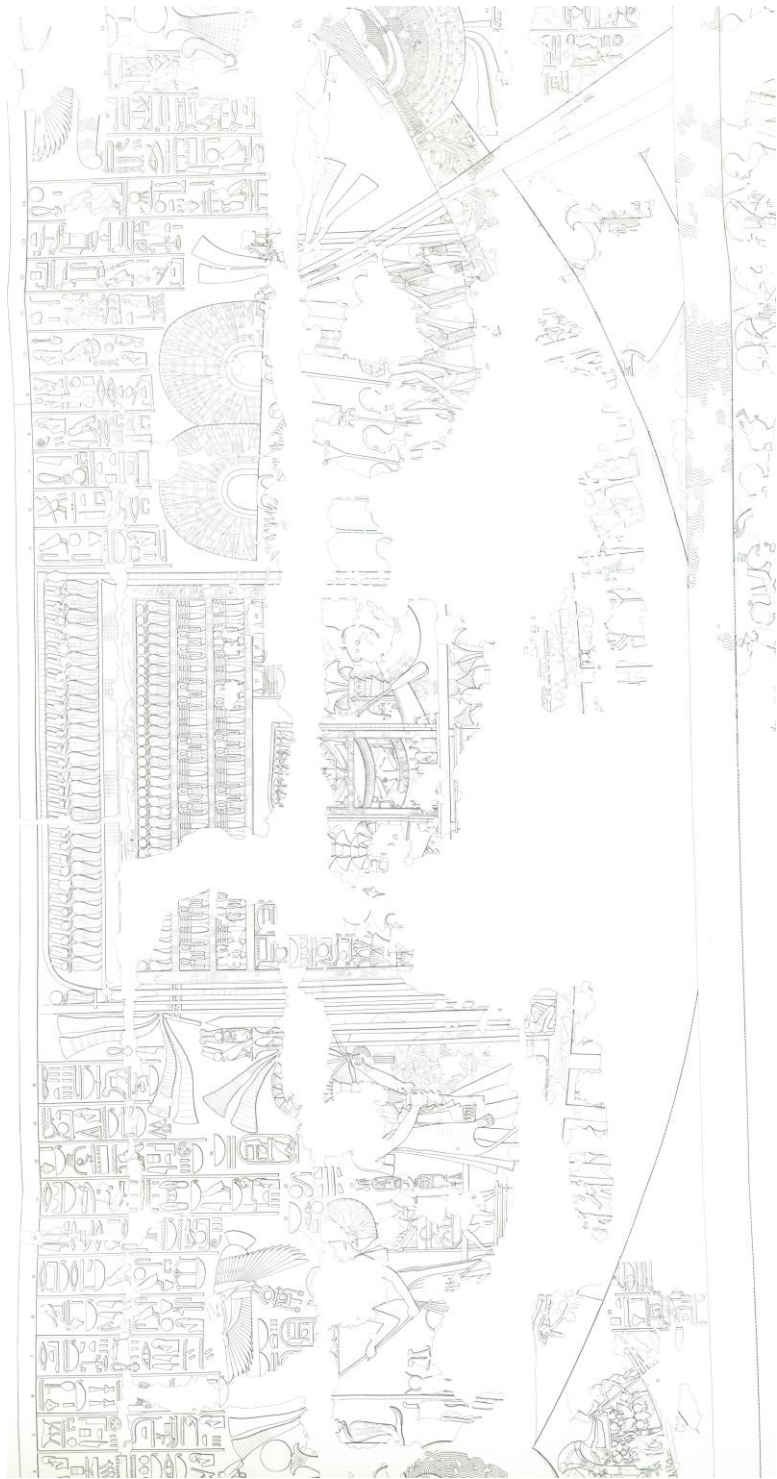
**Figure 14.** Wadjet Eye on Solar Barque. From Karlshausen 2009, pl. 1.



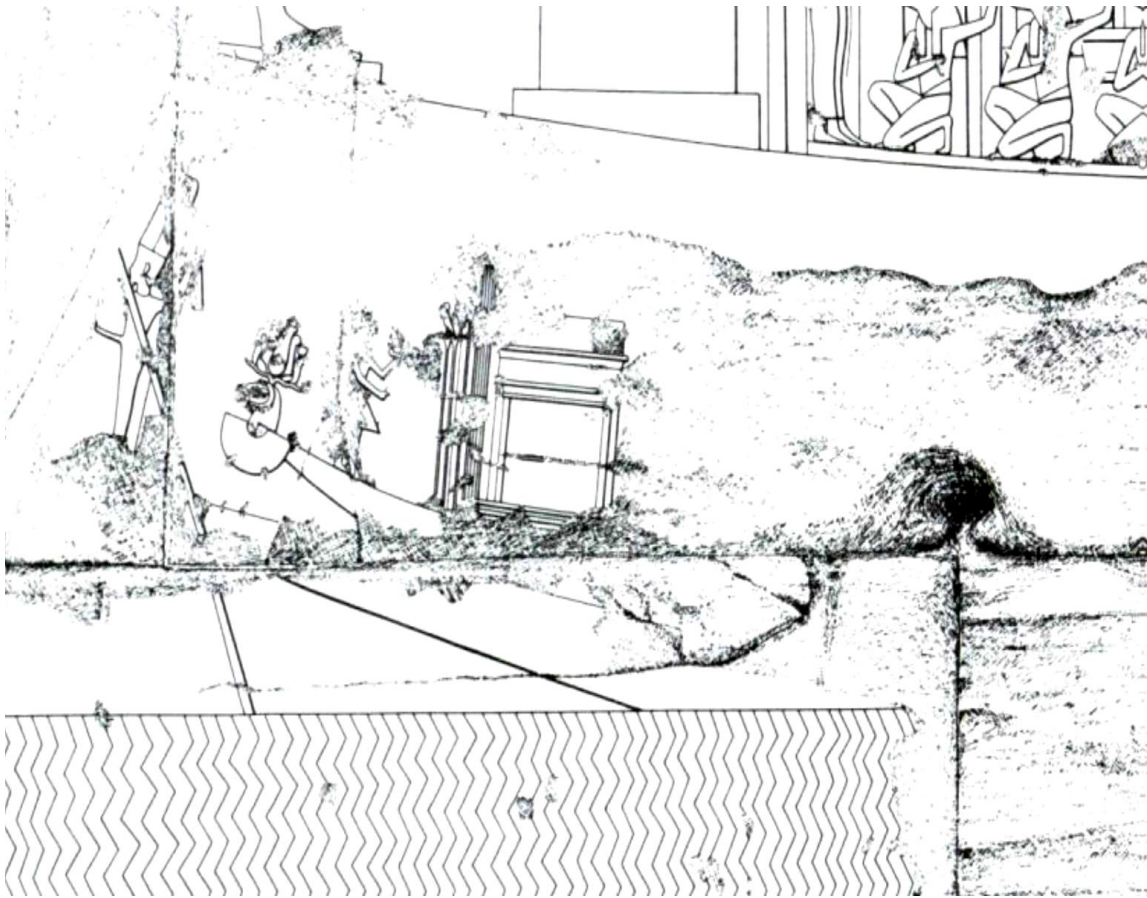
**Figure 15.** *Amun-Userhet* from the East wall of Luxor dating to the reign of Tutankhamun. From *The Epigraphic Study* 1994, pl. 76.



**Figure 16.** *Amun-Userhet* depicted on the Third Pylon at Karnak dating to the reign of Amenhotep III. It was reworked during the reign of Tutankhamun. From Lubicz 1999, pl. 96 and 97.



**Figure 17.** *Amun-Userhet* depicted on the Temple of Khonsu at Karnak dating to the reign of Herihor. From *Epigraphic Study* 1979, pl. 21.



**Figure 18.** Small *Amun-Userhet* depicted on the hull. After Epigraphic Study 1994, pl. 76.

In some instances, scenes of the festival are played out on the hull of the *Amun-Userhet*, as can be seen on the depiction from the east wall of Luxor Temple, the version from the third pylon at Karnak, and in fragments of the depiction from the temple of Khonsu (Fig. 15-17). On the ships from the east wall of Luxor and the third pylon at Karnak, a miniature version of the *Amun-Userhet* is depicted on the hull (Fig. 18). This would support the idea that the *Amun-Userhet* was considered an extension of the temple, as the

rites that are depicted on its hull would have been performed only in the inner sanctuaries of the temple.<sup>78</sup>

### **Deck Structure**

The deck structure depicted on the *Amun-Userhet* was a tent-like configuration made of poles which supported a canopy decorated with the name of the ruling pharaoh. Each ruler provided a new canopy that would cover the deck structure and bear his name.<sup>79</sup> The poles which supported the canopy were almost identical to the poles used on Khufu's barge a millennium earlier (Fig. 19).<sup>80</sup> The structure itself was sometimes covered by a veil. When the structure is depicted unveiled, the portable boat shrine can be seen within. The deck structure on the portable boat shrine was always closed and decorated with images of scarabs and the protective goddess Ma'at.<sup>81</sup> It too was often veiled, concealing the shrine inside.

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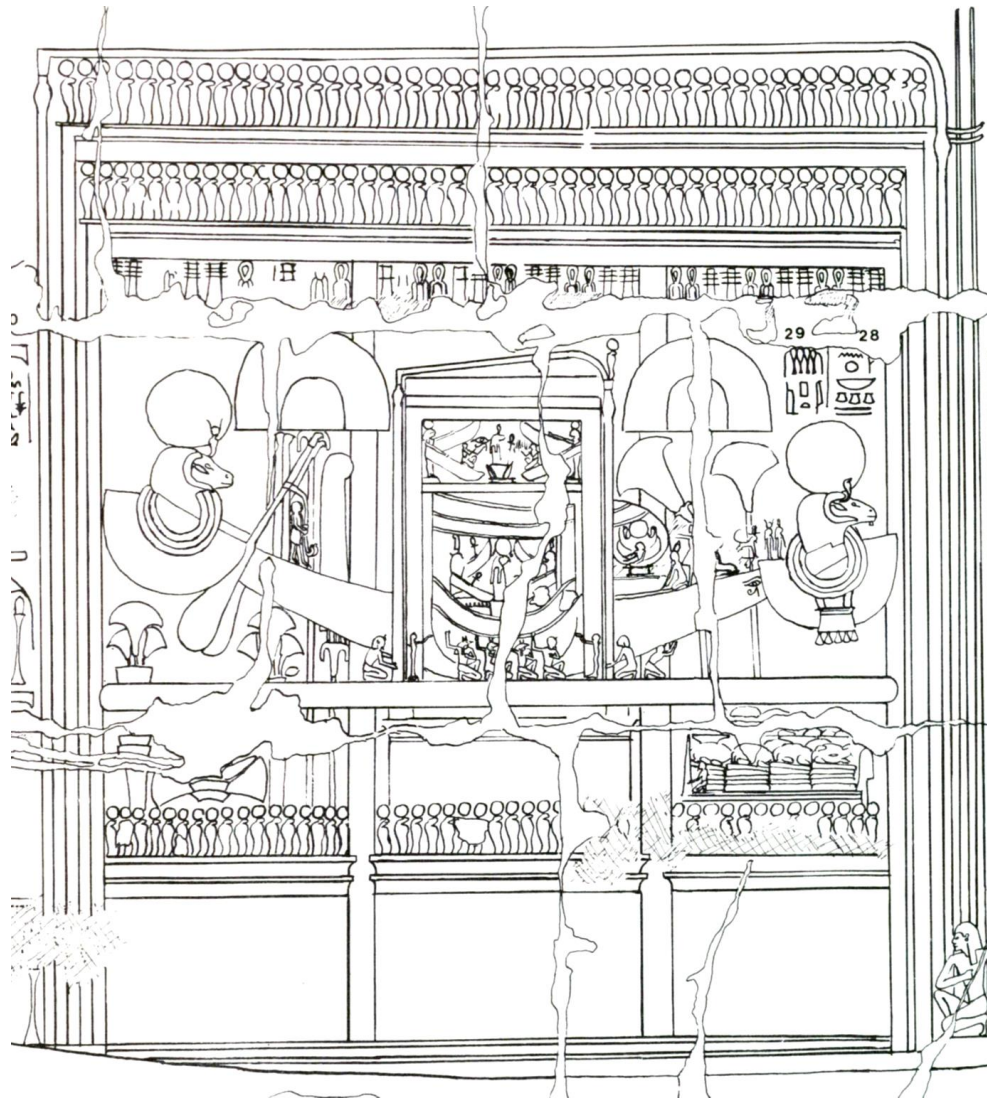
<sup>78</sup> Teeter 2011, 41.

<sup>79</sup> Murnane 1979, 11.

<sup>80</sup> Partridge 1996, 68.

<sup>81</sup> Kemp 2006, 249.





**Figure 19.** Unveiled cabin containing the portable boat shrine dating to the reign of Seti I. After Nelson 1981, pl. 152.

## Pharaoh

The reigning pharaoh on board the *Amun-Userhet* is often depicted making an offering to the portable shrine (Fig. 20-22). The pharaoh responsible for the commission of the image sometimes has a co-regent depicted with him, as was the case

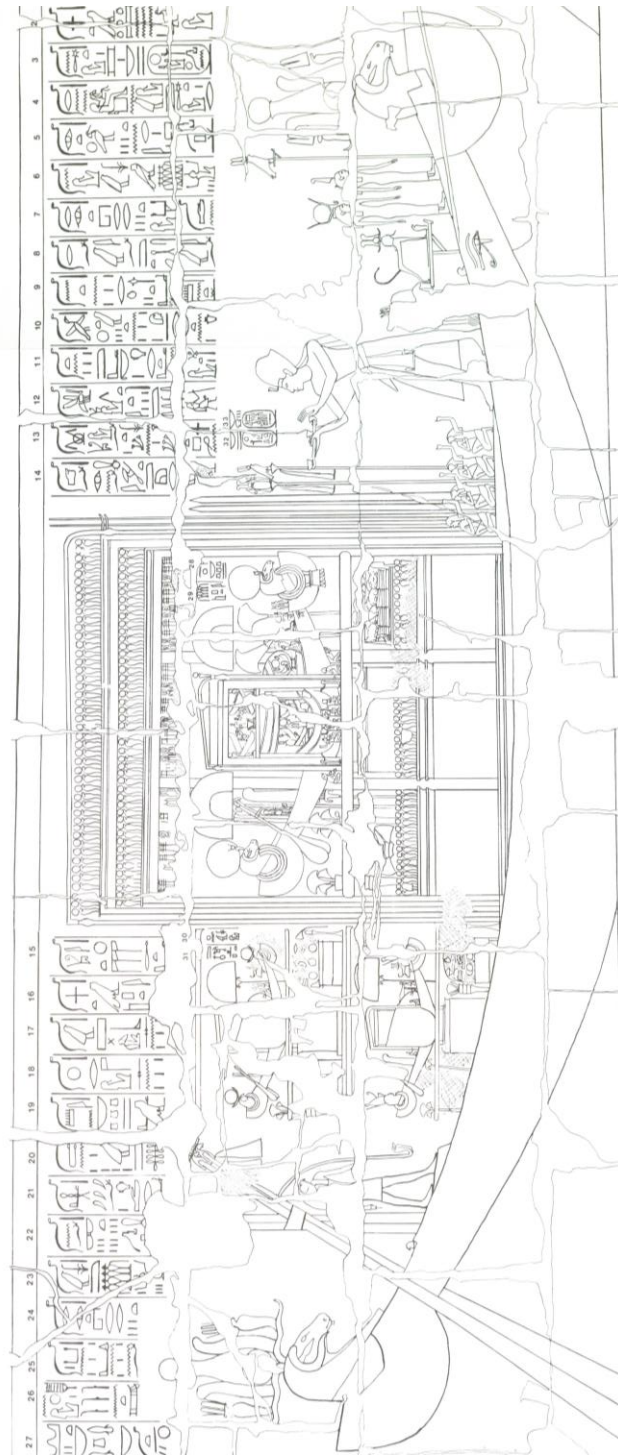
with the ship carved on the side of the Chapelle Rouge by Hatshepsut who included Thutmose III on the deck with her (Fig. 6). In other cases, what was thought to be a co-regent was actually a later addition, as was the case with the smaller figure depicted on the ship carved on the Third Pylon at Karnak.<sup>82</sup>



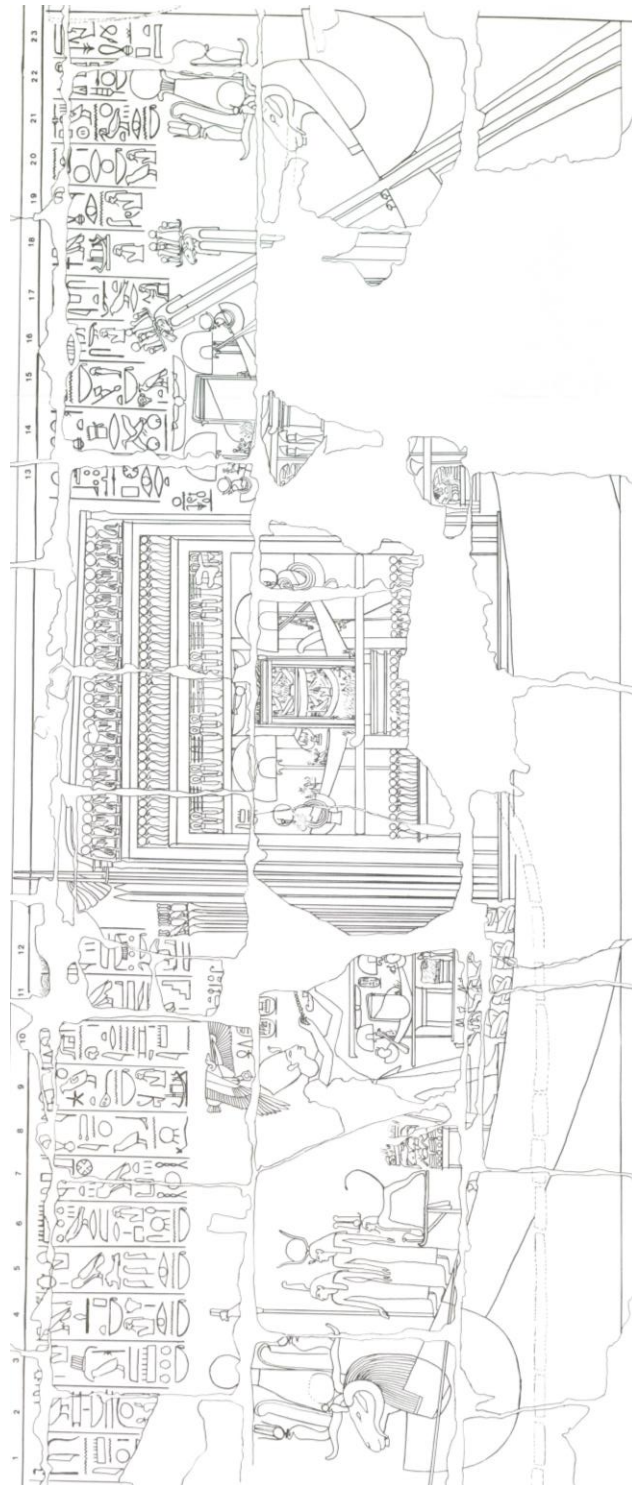
**Figure 20.** Ramesses II making an offering to Amun-Re's boat shrine. After Nelson 1981, pl. 38.

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<sup>82</sup> This smaller and less deeply carved pharaoh can be seen on the stern of the *Amun-Userhet* superimposed over the offering table (see Fig. 15).



**Figure 21.** *Amun-Userhet* of Ramesses II in the great Hypostyle hall of Karnak. From Nelson 1981, pl. 152.



**Figure 22.** *Amun-Userhet* of Seti I in the great Hypostyle hall of Karnak. From Nelson 1981, pl. 38.

Some pharaohs used these images as opportunities to depict their connection with the great temples they adorned. Amenhoep III appeared on the depiction of the *Amun-Userhet* depicted on the third pylon of the Karnak temple.<sup>83</sup> On this particular representation there is another smaller figure of a pharaoh less deeply carved into this depiction. Tutankhamun inserted himself into the scene when he restored this part of the temple after the Amarna period.<sup>84</sup>

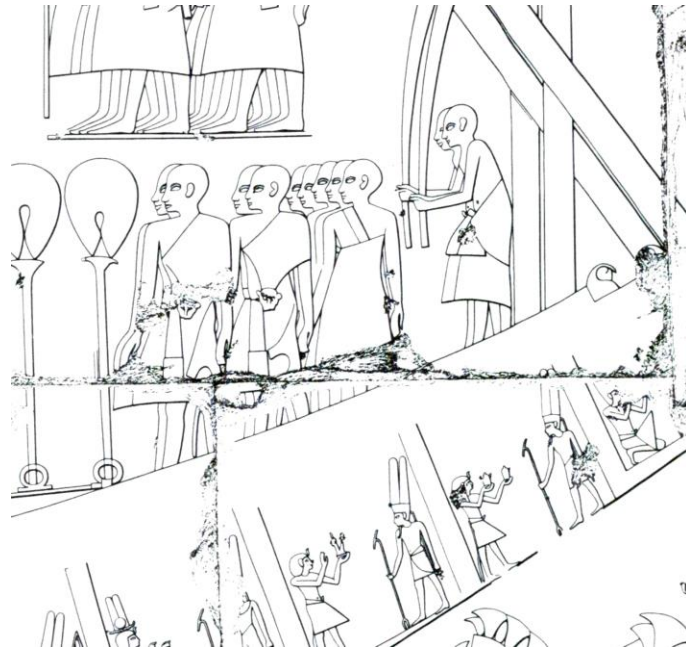
### **Other Human Figures**

There are several other human figures on images of the *Amun-Userhet*. Helmsmen are frequently depicted steering the ship. From the time of Tutankhamun onwards in some of the more detailed depictions, priests are also seen standing on deck (Fig. 23). During this time the priesthood was still recovering from the Amarna period, and the inclusion of the priests might reflect a growing influence the priesthood had over the state religion.

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<sup>83</sup> Murnane 1979, 11.

<sup>84</sup> Murnane 1979, 16.



**Figure 23.** Priests standing on stern of *Amun-Userhet*. After Epigraphic Study 1994, pl. 76.

In later periods, the Wife of Amun, a position held by a royal woman, stands on the ship as well. We don't have any depictions of the Amun-Userhet with a wife of Amun standing on it, but we do have a statue of Karomama, a wife of Amun, with an inscription stating that the statue had been part of a portable barque (Fig. 24).<sup>85</sup> It would stand to reason that the actual wife of Amun would have stood on the Amun-Userhet, since the two ships are almost identical in iconography.

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<sup>85</sup> Hill and Schorsch 2007, 55.



**Figure 24.** Statue of God's wife, Karomama. From Hill and Schorsch 2007, pg. 98.

The wife of Amun was a royal woman, usually a daughter or wife of the pharaoh. She controlled a large estate on behalf of Amun which bestowed rights and responsibilities above those of other royal women.<sup>86</sup> This office is not fully understood, but Miriam Ayad speculates that the role of the wife relates to the idea that Amun was the father of the pharaoh by a mortal woman.<sup>87</sup> The title is only sporadically mentioned after the latter half of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> during the New Kingdom. This is in part due to its association with Hatshepsut which Thutmose III attempted to eradicate along with the female pharaoh's memory.<sup>88</sup>

Murnane also mentions a kilted figure with an upraised hand holding a throwing stick. This figure can be seen in several examples, but his identity and function remain enigmatic.<sup>89</sup> This figure could be connected to Wepwawet, a war god, as the kilted figure is aggressive and might be holding a weapon.

### **Gods Depicted on the *Amun-Userhet***

Khonsu is sometimes depicted on early representations of the *Amun-Userhet* (Fig. 25) This may have simply been because he did not have his own ship in the early XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty. In later depictions he has his own ship.<sup>90</sup> Khonsu is a moon god, but is also associated with the placenta of the King. He does not have many distinguishing features, except for the forelock of youth associated with young princes.<sup>91</sup> Since

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<sup>86</sup> Ayad 2009, 6.

<sup>87</sup> Ayad 2009, 7.

<sup>88</sup> Ayad 2009, 6.

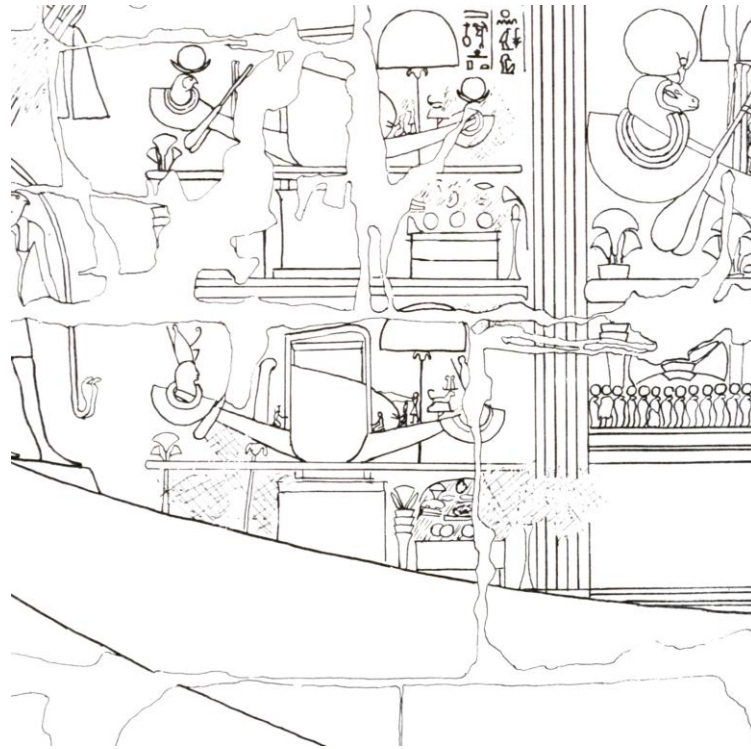
<sup>89</sup> Murnane 1979, 18.

<sup>90</sup> Murnane 1979, 19.

<sup>91</sup> Frankfort 1978, 71



Khonsu was the son of Amun-Re and Mut and the pharaoh was the son of Amun-Re this young god was seen as the pharaoh's twin, much like the moon was twin to the sun.



**Figure 25.** The barges of Mut and Khonsu on board the *Amun-Userhet* dating to the reign of Ramesses II. After Nelson 1981, pl. 38.

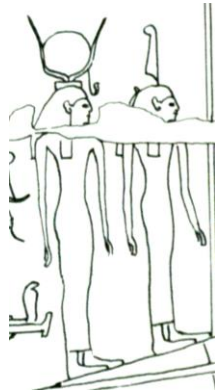
On the versions of the *Amun-Userhet* with scenes of the Opet festival shown on the sides, an ithyphallic Amun participates in the rites with the pharaoh. This is a manifestation of the god Min, an ancient fertility deity.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Watterson 1996, 142.

### **Goddesses Depicted on the *Amun-Userhet***

The two main goddesses depicted on the *Amun-Userhet* are Ma'at and Hathor (Fig. 26). During the first half of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty, Hathor stands before Ma'at on the prow of the ship. From the reign of Tutankhamun onwards, Ma'at stands before Hathor.<sup>93</sup> Since the only two examples of the *Amun-Userhet* from the early XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty come from the reign of Hatshepsut, she may have chosen to put Hathor first in the iconography due to her exceptional relationship with the goddess. This is only speculation as we have no others with which to compare them.



**Figure 26.** Ma'at and Hathor on the bow of the *Amun-Userhet* dating to the reign of Tutankhamun. After *The Epigraphic Study* 1994, pl. 76.

The goddess Ma'at is the divine embodiment of a very complex idea central to the Egyptian religion. As noted by S. Morenz: “Maat is right order in nature and society, as established by the act of creation, and hence means, according to the context,

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<sup>93</sup> Karlshausen 2009, 155.

what is right, what is correct, law, order, justice and truth”.<sup>94</sup> This is the essence of the Opet festival. Ma’at represents the correct order of the universe as it was created in the beginning and refreshed by the pharaoh every year. She is differentiated from Hathor by a feather on her head. This feather was the symbol of Ma’at which she used to weigh the hearts of the dead in order to determine if they were worthy of an afterlife.<sup>95</sup>

Hathor was a multi-faceted deity with many different attributes and associations. She was said to have been both the daughter and mother of Ra. She was also said to be the eye of Ra at times.<sup>96</sup> In this form she was a destructive force as well as a protector. She was responsible for the protection of the pharaoh during his early life as well as after his death.<sup>97</sup> Hathor made sure that the *Amun-Userhet* sailed smoothly and at times even steered the ship. The goddess had a special association with oars and rowing. Because of this, she is called the “mistress of the oar in the Bark of Governance.”<sup>98</sup>

The goddess also acted as a protective mother and may have been associated with the creation and regeneration aspect of the Opet festival.<sup>99</sup> She was most closely associated with childbirth and the protection of unmarried girls. In the case of royal children, she also acted as the wetnurse.<sup>100</sup> Other forms of Hathor, called the “seven Hathors,” bestowed a child’s destiny much like the Greek fates.<sup>101</sup> Hathor could have

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<sup>94</sup> Morenz 1973, 113.

<sup>95</sup> Morenz 1973, 126.

<sup>96</sup> Redford 2003, 158.

<sup>97</sup> Watterson 1996, 121.

<sup>98</sup> Doyle 1998, 153.

<sup>99</sup> Karlshausen 2009, 182.

<sup>100</sup> Watterson 1996, 119.

<sup>101</sup> Watterson 1996, 120.

been responsible for overseeing the rebirth of the pharaoh's *Ka* once they arrived at Luxor.

Subsequently, Isis and Nephthys replaced Ma'at and Hathor.<sup>102</sup> Isis was an extremely popular deity in the Late Period and because of this may have taken over Hathor's role as royal protector and midwife. She was assimilated into the worship of Astarte, Hathor, Bastet, and others which gave her almost universal appeal.<sup>103</sup> Nephthys was the sister of Isis and much less revered. No temples to her alone have been found and she seems to have only existed in the myths of the Heliopolitan triad.<sup>104</sup>

Mut was also depicted on the image found at Deir El Bahari, because like Khonsu, she most likely didn't have her own ship during the early XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty (Fig. 25).<sup>105</sup>

## **Standards**

Early speculation about the standards associated with the *Amun-Userhet* interpreted them representing various districts of Egypt. Some of the standards are the same as the ones representing different nomes, but their meaning as it pertains to the Opet festival and the *Amun-Userhet* is much more complex than just a simple geographic association.<sup>106</sup> The sphinx is the most prominent standard represented on the *Amun-Userhet* (Fig. 13). This figure is an ancient representation of royal power and protection. It is the physical depiction of the superhuman royal power the gods

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<sup>102</sup> Karlshausen 2009, 155.

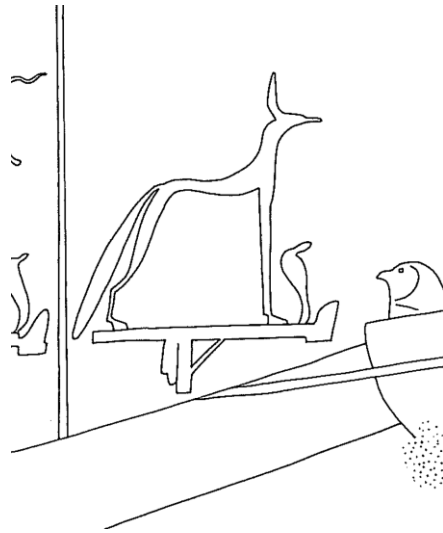
<sup>103</sup> Watterson 1996, 80.

<sup>104</sup> Watterson 1996, 111.

<sup>105</sup> Murnane 1979, 19.

<sup>106</sup> Frankfort 1978, 93.

bestowed upon the pharaoh.<sup>107</sup> An unusual feature of this sphinx is that the standard sits on a base usually reserved for symbols of divinity.<sup>108</sup>



**Figure 27.** Wepwawet standard on the bow of the ship dating to the reign of Hatshepsut. After Burgos and Larché 2006, pg. 60.

The Wepwawet standard is another symbol that dates back to the beginning of pharaonic culture.<sup>109</sup> This standard is not as common as the sphinx standard in the imagery of the Amun-Userhet. It first appears on the ship depicted on Hathor's Chapelle Rouge (Fig. 27).<sup>110</sup> Wepwawet translates to “opener of the ways” and is associated with war, but a full understanding of what this represents eludes modern scholars. The god is

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<sup>107</sup> Frankfort 1978, 11; Černý 1952, 67; Karlshausen 2009, 183.

<sup>108</sup> Frankfort 1978, 63.

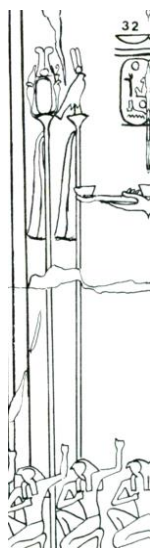
<sup>109</sup> Frankfort 1978, 91.

<sup>110</sup> Murnane 1979, 20.

closely associated with the pharaoh and the royal placenta.<sup>111</sup> He is sometimes called Wepwawet and in one case in the pyramid text is identified with the dead pharaoh.<sup>112</sup>

Another unusual standard found on the Chapelle Rouge are the lotus flowers that appear on the *Amun-Userhet*. The blue lotus is often a theme associated with festivities and is depicted in many places at Karnak. According to Egyptian mythology, the lotus was the original container of Ra.<sup>113</sup>

The *mdw-špsy*, “The great and august poles,” are manifestations of the royal *Ka*. They are depicted as extensions of the *Amun-Userhet*, but could be independent objects of veneration (Fig. 28).<sup>114</sup>



**Figure 28.** The *mdw-špsy*. Dates to the reign of Ramesses II. After Nelson 1981, pl. 38.

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<sup>111</sup> Frankfort 1978, 71.

<sup>112</sup> Frankfort 1978, 92.

<sup>113</sup> Watterson 1996, 40.

<sup>114</sup> Bell 1997, 183.

## The Offering Table

On the majority of portrayals of the *Amun-Userhet* there is an offering table situated between the pharaoh and the sphinx standard (Fig. 29). This table seems to have been part of a well-established formula already in place when the earliest surviving representations of the barque were created.<sup>115</sup> The depiction on the third pylon at Karnak is missing the typical offering table, but this is due to Horemheb having usurped the image of Tutankhamun.<sup>116</sup>



**Figure 29.** Offering Table on the stern of the *Amun-Userhet* dating to the reign of Seti I. The objects depicted on it are pieces of bread, sheep, and geese. After Nelson 1981, pl. 152.

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<sup>115</sup> Murnane 1979, 16.

<sup>116</sup> Murnane 1979, 16.

## Offerings

*Ankh*-bouquets were often included in depictions of the *Amun-Userhet* (Fig. 30).

These elaborate formal bouquets were most closely associated with another New Kingdom festival, but were also featured in the celebrations of Opet.<sup>117</sup> The pharaoh presented these formal bouquets to the god Amun during the rites performed at Luxor.<sup>118</sup>



**Figure 30.** Ankh-bouquet on the stern of the *Amun-Userhet* dating to the reign of Ramesses II. After Nelson 1981, pl. 38.

The *snw* offerings depicted on the offering table were pieces of bread dedicated to Amun, which the priests then passed out to the people (Fig. 29).<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Keimer 1925, 150.

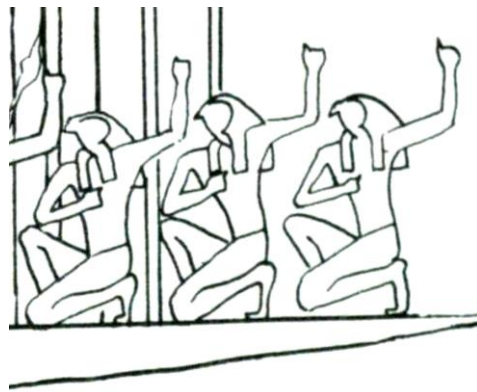
<sup>118</sup> Keimer 1925, 161.

<sup>119</sup> Bell 1997, 183.



### The Souls of Pe and Nekhen

Along the bottom of the shrine of Amun-Ra are small kneeling figures with heads in the shape of falcons or wolves (Fig. 31, 32). They represent the souls of Pe (falcons) and Nekhen (wolves). These souls depicted the ancestors of the ancient pharaohs as well as the dual monarchy. The souls of Pe represent Lower Egypt while the souls of Nekhen represent upper Egypt.<sup>120</sup> Amenhotep III mentions them in his description of the *Amun-Userhet*.<sup>121</sup> He says “The souls of Pe performed a dance of jubilation for it, and the souls of Nekhen adored it.”<sup>122</sup> These figures also appear on the depiction of Hatshepsut’s birth on the middle colonnade of the northern wall of her temple at Deir el Bahari.<sup>123</sup> This also alludes to the rebirth or regeneration of the royal *Ka*.



**Figure 31.** Souls of Pe kneeling before the ship shrine on the deck of the *Amun-Userhet* dating to the reign of Ramesses II. After Nelson 1981, pl. 38.

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<sup>120</sup> Frankfort 1978, 93.

<sup>121</sup> See chapter three for a more detailed discussion of this description.

<sup>122</sup> Baines 2006, 277.

<sup>123</sup> Naville 1896 vol. 2 pl. 51.



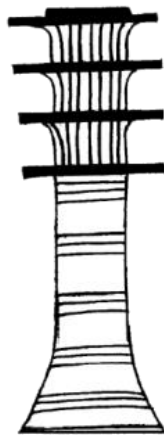
**Figure 32.** The Souls of Nekhen kneeling before the shrine of Amun on the deck of the *Amun-Userhet* dating to the reign of Seti I. After Nelson 1981, pl. 152.

### **Djed Pillars**

The *Djed* pillar is a bound column of papyrus stems (Fig. 33). When the cabin of the *Amun-Userhet* appears veiled, the pattern on the cloth is a repeating pattern of *Djed* pillars and Ankhs. The pillar is a symbol of Hathor and is associated with another ritual called the ‘raising of the *Djed* pillar.’ In the ritual, the *Djed* pillar symbolizes a pregnant Hathor in her role as the mother-goddess.<sup>124</sup> The idea of a goddess giving birth corroborates the renewal of the royal *Ka* during the rituals performed in the Luxor temple.

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<sup>124</sup> Frankfort 1978, 178.



**Figure 33.** Djed pillar. After Watterson 1996, pg. 55.

### **Religious Significance of Iconographic Components**

The individual components represented on the *Amun-Userhet* fall into two categories: royal symbols and divine symbols.<sup>125</sup> The royal symbols all have a long history in Egyptian religion, with most of them dating to the Old Kingdom or earlier. They all represent the potency of the pharaoh or tools with which the pharaoh wields divine power.<sup>126</sup> This in turn makes the *Amun-Userhet* a tool to be used for this same purpose.

The river barque, in imitation of the temples with which it was associated communicated the will of the gods while at the same time excluding the majority of people from experiencing it themselves. The ship was a part of the god, but also a shield

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<sup>125</sup> Karlshausen 2009.

<sup>126</sup> Bell 1997, 183.

for the god. It allowed the people to experience *Ma'at* and interact with Amun while still shielding the populace from direct contact.

### CHAPTER III

#### REFERENCES TO THE *AMUN-USERHET* IN LITERATURE

There are several references to the *Amun-Userhet* that have survived. These texts date from the middle XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty to the Third Intermediate Period. The most helpful texts are direct descriptions of the ship itself, but other texts can be useful when combed for details. These secondary texts can also provide a more complete picture of the social context within which the *Amun-Userhet* existed.

The account of Wenamun is a report written on a papyrus which details the account of a priest of Amun travelling to acquire the materials needed to build a new *Amun-Userhet* between the years 23 and 25 of the reign of Ramesses XI.<sup>127</sup> The copy that has survived was not the original report, but a copy made as much as 150 years after the actual events took place. We know this because it is labeled “copy” which was a practice only attested to in the XXII<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty, as well as the fact that its provenience, El-Hibeh, was a town that only became important under Sheshonk I. This period saw a renewed interest in the Levant and may explain why someone wanted a report of a voyage to those lands.<sup>128</sup>

The account tells of Wenamun, a priest of Amun, who Herihor sends to Byblos to acquire lumber for a new incarnation of the *Amun-Userhet*. After stopping at Tanis, Wenamun rests at Dor where a man steals from his ship. He manages to gain restitution on the high seas while sailing to Byblos where he is given a cold reception. The ruler of Byblos, Zakar-Baal, finally agrees to see Wenamun, but refuses to give the supplies to

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<sup>127</sup> Goedicke 1975, 6.

<sup>128</sup> Goedicke 1975, 7.

Wenamun and demands payment for which Wenamun is forced to send to Tanis. After spending almost a year in Byblos, Wenamun attempts to return to Egypt, but on his return voyage, his ship is blown off course to Alashiya (Cyprus) where an angry mob attacks him and he is forced to seek the protection of the queen Heteb. The report stops in mid-sentence.

This text is a fascinating glimpse into the politics of the late New Kingdom. At the time the original account was written, most of Egypt was controlled by the high priests of Amun.<sup>129</sup> The journey to gather supplies for a new barque would have been extremely important. Unfortunately, a discussion of late New Kingdom politics is beyond the scope of this work.

The account provides evidence of some of the more practical matters of the *Amun-Userhet*. During his audience with Zakar-Baal, Wenamun claims that he has come to fulfill the contract, “As your father did and as your father’s father did.”<sup>130</sup> This could simply be a formulaic way of describing the longstanding Egyptian practice of acquiring lumber from Byblos, but it could also mean that the Amun-Userhet was rebuilt every generation. Each ruler provided a new canopy for the barque: in some cases they may have provided a new ship as well.<sup>131</sup>

Once Zakar-Baal receives his payment, he dispatches 300 men and 300 oxen to gather the lumber. It takes them all winter to do so.<sup>132</sup> While the numbers may have been exaggerated, nevertheless, this detail suggests that a large amount of man power

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<sup>129</sup> Arnold 1999, 29; Otto 1968, 84.

<sup>130</sup> Goedicke 1975, 73.

<sup>131</sup> Murnane 1979, 11.

<sup>132</sup> Goedicke 1975, 98.

was required to procure this quantity of timber. This corresponds to other descriptions, discussed below, which detail the enormous size of the Amun-Userhet. Another interesting detail that should be noted from this portion of the text suggests that Zakar-Baal did not provide pre-cut and seasoned timber for Wenamun, but had his men cut down the wood only after he had heard Wenamun's request.

There are two direct descriptions of the Amun-Userhet that have survived. The most extensive comes from Amenhotep III and reads:

The Dual King Nebma'atre, exemplar of Re,  
Son of Re, Amenhotep ruler of Thebes.  
Again I made a monument for the one who bore me,  
Amon-Re, Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands,  
Who established me on his throne:  
Making for him a great bark for river travel,  
(named) Amon-Re is Great of Prow,  
In fresh pine which His Person felled on the uplands of God's Land,  
Being dragged from the mountains of Syria  
By the chiefs of all foreign lands,  
Being made very broad and large, its like never having been made before,  
Its interior purified with silver,  
And it was worked with gold throughout,  
Its great shrine being of electrum.  
Its prow doubled its length and was endowed with vast crowns,  
their cobras encircling on its two sides,  
acting in protection all around.  
Flagpoles were set up before it (the shrine),  
Worked with electrum,  
With two great obelisks between them.  
It was beautiful on all sides.  
The Souls of Pe performed a dance of jubilation for it,  
And the Souls of Nekhen adored it.  
The Meret goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt propitiated its presence.  
Its prow illuminated the primeval waters,  
Like the rising of the sun in the sky,  
In order to make its perfect navigation at his (the god's) festival of Opet,  
(and) at his navigation of the West

Of millions and millions of years.<sup>133</sup>

This description matches up nicely with the surviving images that have been preserved. The shrine that held the image of the god is mentioned as well as the decorations at the prow. It even explicitly states that the cobras encircling the prow provided protection. Both the souls of Pe and Nekhen are mentioned as well ‘Flagpoles’ which refer to the standards placed on the deck. As already noted, the souls of Pe and Nekhen represent the souls of the ancestors of the pharaoh as well as upper and lower Egypt. In this reference, the souls of Pe and Nekhen could be a metaphor for the people of Egypt.

The second direct description dates to the reign of Ramses III. It states:

I hewed for thee thy august ship ‘Userhet’, of one hundred and thirty cubits, upon the river, of great cedars of the royal domain of remarkable size, overlaid with fine gold to the water line, like a bark of the Sun, when he comes from the east, and everyone lives at the sight of him. A great shrine was in the midst of it, of fine gold, with inlay of every costly stone like a palace; rams’ heads of gold from front to rear, fitted with uraeus serpents wearing crowns.<sup>134</sup>

This account also aligns well with previous descriptions and the surviving images. In this description, the hull is ‘covered in gold to the water line.’ As mentioned above, when paint survives on the hull of an Amun-Userhet, it is yellow, perhaps indicating the gold that covered the hull. The shrine on board this barque is gold instead of silver as in the previous description.

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<sup>133</sup> Baines 2006, 276.

<sup>134</sup> Canney 1936, 51.



Another papyrus that dates to end of the Twentieth Dynasty does not mention the Amun-Userhet directly, but deals with the theft of items from the temple of Amun at Karnak.<sup>135</sup> It consists mostly of an inventory of items, and unfortunately does not detail how the criminal was punished: presumably Amun's oracle would have not been pleased to be forced to pronounce judgment on a crime committed in his own temple. Gold, copper, fine linen, and white gold are all mentioned in the inventory of stolen goods.<sup>136</sup> In this inventory gold is listed not by its weight, but by length and width.<sup>137</sup> The author mentions that this is unusual, but doesn't comment further. This unusual description indicates that it was actually gold leaf that was stolen, and could be the gold leaf used to decorate the Amun-Userhet or its accoutrements. Unfortunately, only a fraction of this papyrus has survived, and the only name mentioned, Djehuty-hotep, is the name of the criminal.

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<sup>135</sup> Goelet 1996, 107.

<sup>136</sup> Goelet 1996, 109.

<sup>137</sup> Goelet 1996, 113.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ROLE OF THE *AMUN-USERHET* IN THE OPET FESTIVAL

The iconography associated with the Amun-Userhet provides us with a deeper understanding of the role it played in the Opet festival. In the most practical and literal sense, the ship was used to transport for the image of Amun-Ra. More symbolically, it was a tangible and visible connection between the god and pharaoh and the populace of Egypt.

Egypt has a long history of venerating boats in religious contexts that survives until the present day. The people of Egypt relied on boats for almost every aspect of their life because at the center of everything was the Nile. It provided drinking water, nourishment for their crops, and a means of efficient transportation. Because of this, boats not only played an important function in the everyday lives of the Egyptians, they also played an extremely important function in their religious beliefs. Boats and nautical terms are used frequently as metaphors in the Pyramid Texts, the Coffin Texts, and the Book of the Dead.

Not only were boats mentioned in funerary texts, but actual boats were buried with many of the pharaohs associated with the great pyramids of the Old Kingdom. The most famous of these are the great barques of Khufu, one of which was fully preserved, and subsequently reconstructed. It is on display in a museum next to the Great Pyramids.<sup>138</sup> This practice of including life-sized boats in burials would have been extremely expensive. By the sixth dynasty in Egypt political upheavals and uncertain

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<sup>138</sup> Jenkins 1980; Ward 2000.

economic conditions lead to the practice of leaving models of boats in tombs instead of the much more costly and time-consuming full sized boats.<sup>139</sup>

While funerary texts have been preserved from the Old Kingdom, most of what is known today about the Egyptian afterlife comes from the New Kingdom.<sup>140</sup> Of course, what we know as “books” of the afterlife were not grouped together as such until modern times.<sup>141</sup> The Pyramid Texts date back to the V<sup>th</sup> and VI<sup>th</sup> dynasties of the Old Kingdom and since Ra is mentioned in these, it seems safe to assume that there was continuity between the beliefs of the Old Kingdom and those recorded in the New Kingdom.<sup>142</sup>

Any discussion of ships participating in the Opet festival is incomplete without mentioning the practice of using the portable boat shrines for purposes of divination. While the idea of oracles was not new to Egypt, this form was first recorded in the New Kingdom.<sup>143</sup> This was also the most public and easily accessible way to contact the god. While the priests were carrying the portable boat shrine to and from the temples, people could ask question and receive answers via the motion of the shrine.<sup>144</sup>

There are several recorded instances of divination occurring during the Opet festival. One of the first involves Thutmose III. He recorded that the barque of Amun “settled” before him during its procession in a festival and led him to a temple called

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<sup>139</sup> Jones 1995, 2.

<sup>140</sup> Ikram 2003, 23.

<sup>141</sup> Faulkner and Allen 2005, 12.

<sup>142</sup> Jones 1995, 14.

<sup>143</sup> Černý 1962, 35.

<sup>144</sup> Quirke 1992, 100.

‘Station of the Lord’ thus indicating that he would be the next pharaoh.<sup>145</sup> The god contacted other pharaohs in this same way. Hatshepsut, Thutmose IV, Ramses III, and Pasebakhanniut II all received oracles from the god.<sup>146</sup>

In one, Amunemuia petitions Amun of Pe-Khenty to recover stolen property and the god “nodded greatly.” J. Černý assumed this to mean that the palanquin the god was traveling on dipped in assent. The supplicant then names the people in the town and when he speaks the name of the guilty party, the oracle indicates his guilt. The man denies it and the god becomes “exceedingly wrath.”<sup>147</sup> The accused appealed to two other oracles, Amun of Tashenyt and Amun of Bukentef, both of which were local versions of Amun, every oracle confirmed his guilt. He returned to the original oracle and was punished before the town. It is unclear exactly what that punishment was. A. Blackman speculates that one of the priests administers a beating. After this, the man confesses his guilt and promises to restore the stolen goods. He is then sentenced to another beating and made to swear an oath that he will not do so again on pain of being fed to the crocodiles.<sup>148</sup>

In another record of an oracle, the scribe Tuthmosis writes to his friend that he has ‘brought him to the attention’ of an oracle which replies “I will protect thee, I will bring thee back safe, and thou shalt fill thine eye with the Court”.<sup>149</sup> A. Blackman suggests that the scribe placed an object or an ostrakon with his friend’s name written on

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<sup>145</sup> Teeter 2011, 111; Černý 1962, 35.

<sup>146</sup> Teeter 2011, 111; Wachsmann 2013, 112.

<sup>147</sup> Černý 1962, 40.

<sup>148</sup> Blackman 1925, 253; Černý 1962, 41.

<sup>149</sup> Blackman 1926, 185.

it before the oracle during a festival procession.<sup>150</sup> Another reference to an oracle states that until a certain matter was resolved, the god would not participate in a festival.<sup>151</sup> While we do know that the portable barque of Amun was used in this kind of divination, it is unclear in most sources how exactly the god made his will be known. G. Legrain suggests that the shrine became heavy and made the bearers stop.<sup>152</sup> Černý goes on to suggest that the shrine moved in one direction or another because of the word for a negative answer, *n 'ynḥ*’, which translates “to walk backwards”.<sup>153</sup> There are also later documents that describe another god walking forwards as an affirmative.<sup>154</sup> Some images of this process have been preserved, but it is difficult to ascertain whether or not the forward or backward movement of the ship shrine is what indicated answers from these images alone (Fig. 34).<sup>155</sup>

While the opportunities to influence or control these oracles, especially if the priests had already chosen an answer, may seem to be a problem far greater than the peoples’ willingness to believe in them, it could have acted as a convenient manner to settle matters in a way that society as a whole could agree on. These oracles, controlled by the god, provided a means to render a quick judgment on difficult cases that otherwise may have ended in violence.<sup>156</sup> Emily Teeter suggests “The use of the oracle avoided the awkwardness of having a single member of the community stand in judgment of another. Rather, guilt was established by the god, a being who was above

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<sup>150</sup> Blackman 1926, 185.

<sup>151</sup> Mysliwiec 2000, 40.

<sup>152</sup> Legrain 1917, 48.

<sup>153</sup> Černý 1962, 44.

<sup>154</sup> Černý 1962, 45.

<sup>155</sup> Moret 1917.

<sup>156</sup> Quirke 1992, 100.

reproach.”<sup>157</sup> This argument is weakened by the fact that a page earlier the author compares the relationship between petitioners and the god to squabbling neighbors. Perhaps instead of saying these judgments were handed down by an omniscient being, it would be more accurate to say that this processes used a familiar representation of power to veil and soften this social tension.



**Figure 34.** Stela depicting a person consulting an oracle. From Moret 1917, pg. 158.

The oracles were not really used for divining the future; they were used to understand the present. This is another example of how the Opet festival preserved the

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<sup>157</sup> Teeter 2011, 109.

idea of *Ma'at* and how Amun's ship was used to do so.<sup>158</sup> If the temple was a microcosm meant to represent the universe, the ship palanquin was a microcosm of the *Amun-Userhet*. While the pharaoh preserved *Ma'at* by participating in the Opet festival, the people of Egypt preserved it by participating in the oracles.

While the *Amun-Userhet* itself was not a part of the oracles, the iconography of the portable barque shrine indicates that these were an almost exact copy of the larger barque. As such, both of these cult items performed the same role. Each was a tangible reminder of the power of the gods and the pharaoh and each was a tool used to preserve *Ma'at*. The *Amun-Userhet* was also a physical reminder of the cycle the Opet festival sought to continue. The ship heralded the beginning of the festival, as well as its end. It was over when the portable barques were reinstalled in their shrines at Karnak.<sup>159</sup>

The importance that ships and the *Amun-Userhet* especially held in the Opet festival still resonates today in modern Luxor. In the city the people hold a festival every year in honor of Ysuf Abu'l Haggag who is the patron saint of Luxor. The festival is a birthday celebration. During this festival, the people of Luxor hold a procession during which boats are mounted on carts and paraded through the streets.

People give many explanations for the inclusion of ships. One explanation is that the ships are a commemoration of the journey the saint took when he was summoned by the King of Egypt. He made the journey to Cairo accompanied by three other sheikhs in a stone boat in less than two days.<sup>160</sup> Others say that the ships represent their importance

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<sup>158</sup> Černý 1962, 35.

<sup>159</sup> Bell 1997, 176.

<sup>160</sup> Canney 1936; Hornell 1938.

to the pilgrimage to Mecca, while some think that they commemorate a miracle the saint performed by saving a wrecked ship, and still others explain that the saint travelled to Luxor by boat.<sup>161</sup> This celebration should not be taken as a direct descendant of the Opet festival, as there was a considerable gap between the end of the pharaonic festival and the beginning of the Islamic one.<sup>162</sup>

There are, however, some parallels that suggest influence may be left over from pharaonic times. Canney reports that, in the parade, ships are draped with a cloth, much like the veils that covered the shrines of the pharaonic period.<sup>163</sup> This tradition survives into recent years with the practice of parading camels around with canopies blessed by sheikhs on their backs.<sup>164</sup> The idea of the god's wife may have also survived in an early record of the Islamic festival. The saint's wife had a camel canopy dedicated to her in the procession. The marriage of the saint is no longer celebrated today, and is replaced instead with a parody of a "king" and his transvestite "queen."<sup>165</sup> The ships are also refurbished every year, but the same ones are used for a long time. The oldest ship reported in the 1998 celebration was 60 years old.<sup>166</sup> These parallels are certainly intriguing, but do not necessarily mean the Islamic celebration is a direct descendant. This modern ship procession is an echo of the ancient festival celebrated in the same temple, and its most important aspect, the *Amun-Userhet*.

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<sup>161</sup> Wachsmann 2002a, 822.

<sup>162</sup> Wachsmann 2002a, 823.

<sup>163</sup> Canney 1938, 144.

<sup>164</sup> Wickett 2009, 419.

<sup>165</sup> Wickett 2009, 420.

<sup>166</sup> Wachsmann 2002a, 825.



## CHAPTER V

### PERSONAL PIETY AND THE *AMUN-USERHET*

The idea of a personal relationship with a god is mostly an invention of the New Kingdom. In the Old and Middle Kingdoms, the gods were not seen as entities that interacted with people, not even with the pharaoh.<sup>167</sup> Egyptians did not carve images of the gods onto their personal monuments during this time period.<sup>168</sup> The king was the overshadowing theme in the religious and political landscape of Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt. This eliminated the need for people to have a personal relationship with the gods.<sup>169</sup>

The New Kingdom brought about a different perspective on the official state religion. During this period, Thuthmosis III organized the priests of every temple into one large state-controlled entity.<sup>170</sup> The official view still remained that the pharaoh was the sole contact between humanity and the gods, but the people now also had a role, first as spectators in festivals, and then as participants in divination.<sup>171</sup> During the Amarna period the pharaoh Akhenaten started the spread of personal piety.<sup>172</sup> His idea of the Aten allowed for a more direct connection to the concept of deity. The pharaoh was now the high priest of Aten.<sup>173</sup> The new god also took on a new symbol: a sun disk with rays emanating from it, which ended in human hands. The rays of the sun were seen as a

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<sup>167</sup> Černý 1952, 67.

<sup>168</sup> Černý 1952, 67.

<sup>169</sup> Baines 1987, 80.

<sup>170</sup> Breasted 1972, 319.

<sup>171</sup> Černý 1952, 68.

<sup>172</sup> Ausec 2010, 11.

<sup>173</sup> Breasted 1972, 321.

metaphor for Aten: ever present, ever accessible to the pharaoh and all powerful.<sup>174</sup> This was in direct conflict with the influential organization the priesthood of Amun had become. In an effort to check the authority of the priesthood, Ankhenaten attempted to destroy every mention of the god Amun or even the word ‘gods’.<sup>175</sup> Even though the Amarna period did not last long after the death of Ankhenaten, the idea that the gods were accessible to the populace of Egypt remained.

Even before this, attitudes towards the gods were changing in the New Kingdom. The idea that a pharaoh would consult an oracle was firmly rooted in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, but it was possible that such consultations began earlier as Middle Kingdom pharaohs state that they received orders from the gods, but they are not explicitly described as oracles.<sup>176</sup> After the Amarna period, the idea that people could interact with the gods on a personal level gained more hold in the public’s consciousness. Amun took on these newer attributes, and the state religion adapted around them.<sup>177</sup>

The central debate surrounding the Opet festival and the role of Amun’s ship is whether or not people were allowed in the temples. Scholars are split on whether or not the temples were public spaces used for large gathering of temples. Most of them fall on the side of temples having had some sort of public function area.<sup>178</sup> At the very least they agree that people would have been watching and celebrating festivals on the banks of the Nile.<sup>179</sup> To a modern person, the temples of Karnak and Luxor would be ideal

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<sup>174</sup> Breasted 1972, 333.

<sup>175</sup> Breasted 1972, 322.

<sup>176</sup> Baines 1987, 90.

<sup>177</sup> Breasted 1972, 346.

<sup>178</sup> Morenz 1973; Bell 1997; Ausec 2010; Darnell 2010; Teeter 2011.

<sup>179</sup> Darnell 2010, 44.

locations for a centralized gathering of the populace. Egyptians living during the New Kingdom did not share this sentiment. The common people may not have wanted an individual relationship with the god.

During the Middle Kingdom and early New Kingdom, uncontrolled contact with deities often ended poorly for the person involved. Contact with a god when unsolicited was seen as a bad omen and sign of the displeasure of the gods.<sup>180</sup> One notable exception to this was the god choosing certain pharaohs, but as noted above, the pharaoh was supposed to act as intermediary for the gods. For most people unsolicited contact with the gods came in the form of the god's *bau*. This was a negative force that could manifest itself in different ways either through misfortune, guilt, unease, or even a spell causing the person to act in an unusual manner.<sup>181</sup> Blurring the distinctions between the human and divine realms that had been separated since the creation of the world also brought about the danger of disrupting the delicate balance that kept the universe running.<sup>182</sup> The Egyptian people may not have liked the idea of an uncontrolled personal relationship with a deity.

It is a common mistake for modern people to assume that people living in ancient times had the same attitude or mindset as them. While individuals today assume that large buildings are meant to hold large numbers of people, this does not mean that the ancient Egyptians had this same idea in mind when building their monuments. J. Baines argues that while attendance at festivals was encouraged, the priests and pharaoh staged

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<sup>180</sup> Teeter 2011, 112.

<sup>181</sup> Teeter 2011, 113.

<sup>182</sup> Bell 1997, 133.

the rituals inside the temples as a way of excluding large numbers of people from participating.<sup>183</sup> The large court yards and halls of the temple served only what he calls the “theatrical purpose” of displaying the rituals during the time when they were not being performed. He sees these building as representations of rituals that did not require an audience. The scenes depicted within their walls allowed the universe to keep functioning daily.<sup>184</sup> The large scale of the temples was simply another status symbol for the pharaoh.<sup>185</sup>

Baines also puts emphasis on the fact that depictions and descriptions of the Opet festival and the *Amun-Userhet* do not include depictions of spectators. He argues that “the iconography of river barks both constituted spectacle and conveyed a message of exclusion.”<sup>186</sup> This is based on a faulty reading of the iconography at Luxor. There are reliefs that depict sailors and musicians as participants in the festival.<sup>187</sup>

Most scholars support the idea that the people would have had at least marginal contact with the deity in the temple.<sup>188</sup> Both Karnak and Luxor have hieroglyphs, called *rekhyt*, carved into pillars on Amenhotep III’s sun court and Hypostyle hall respectively (Fig. 35).<sup>189</sup> This glyph represented the Egyptian populace and marked places of public gatherings.<sup>190</sup> This would bolster the idea that at some point the populace was allowed in this area.

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<sup>183</sup> Baines 2006, 287.

<sup>184</sup> Baines 2006, 276.

<sup>185</sup> Baines 2006, 283.

<sup>186</sup> Baines 2006, 278.

<sup>187</sup> Sadek 1987, 176.

<sup>188</sup> Morenz 1973, 102; Bell 1997, 145; Ausec 2010; Darnell 2010, 2; Teeter 2011, 104.

<sup>189</sup> Ausec 2010, 39.

<sup>190</sup> Ausec 2010, 42.



**Figure 35.** *Rekhyet* glyph in the First Courtyard of Luxor Temple from the reign of Tutankhamun. After Bell 1997, pg. 165.

Egyptians built their temples as strongholds against chaotic forces. They were places separated from the normal profane world; built on consecrated ground the temple was a space outside of time.<sup>191</sup> Because of this, the people gathered in the temple in designated areas during celebrations and other special times of the year to adore the god and witness the effects of the rituals performed within the more restricted sections. This kind of contact would not have been seen as harmful as temples were protected places.<sup>192</sup> According to Morenz, the scribe Ani says that the cult image of the god requires “singing, dancing, and incense are his food and to receive prostrations is his right.”<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Bell 1997, 135; Morenz 1973, 88.

<sup>192</sup> Morenz 1973, 87.

<sup>193</sup> Morenz 1973, 90.

Temple decorations were also not just for the priests and deities. Although the vast majority of the populace could not read, there was a small percentage who could and the illiterate could at least glean meaning from the scenes and figures on the wall.

Their understanding of complex issues of theology and religious matters were probably at the same level as modern parishioners. L. Bell states: “The spectacular endurance of pharaonic civilization attests eloquently to the success of kings and priests in engaging people in the ritual process that maintained and renewed the established religious, political, and social system.”<sup>194</sup> The barque shrines of Luxor also provide evidence that more than just the priests and the pharaoh had access to the temple. The east wall has an inscription describing it as “a place of supplication, of hearing petitions of gods and men.”<sup>195</sup> These barque shrines may provide the key to understanding the progression of positive personal interactions with the god, from something that only happened in the temple to something that occurred in a controlled setting outside the temple bounds.

During the early New Kingdom festivals were the only time when the populace had the chance to be active participants in their own religion.<sup>196</sup> They were allowed access to the temple and if they were allowed to gather near the barque shrine, this is where they may have felt most comfortable.<sup>197</sup> Since the barques were considered to be miniature temples, contact with the god through these shrines would have been an extension of this controlled contact. The people were comfortable approaching the god

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<sup>194</sup> Bell 1997, 135.

<sup>195</sup> Ausec 2010, 41.

<sup>196</sup> Assman 2002, 231.

<sup>197</sup> Morenz 1973, 89.

in his temple. It was designed to preserve *Ma'at* that the Egyptian people cherished so much and provided a safe space within which a person could experience the divine. The appearance of the god during the festival and his encounter with the people was the pinnacle of the event.<sup>198</sup>

The idea of *Ma'at* changed slightly during the New Kingdom from the concept originating during the Old Kingdom. *Ma'at* was still seen as the right way to live, but instead of expecting people to connect and solidify with the community, they were expected to accept the will of the god and do his bidding.<sup>199</sup> Eventually personal piety and devotion to the will of the god replaced the entire idea of *Ma'at*. This devotion is encapsulated in the phrase “given god into their hearts,” which describes the bond between person and deity.<sup>200</sup>

The *Amun-Userhet* and smaller portable boat shrine were temples realized in miniature allowing Egyptians controlled access to deities outside of temples. This access allowed the populace to embrace and experience the new form of *Ma'at*. The increasingly important role the Amun-Userhet and ship shrines played in the state religion reflected an increasing ability to access the will of the god.<sup>201</sup>

This transformation of philosophy coincides with the rise of the use of ship shrines as oracles. As discussed above, during the early years of the New Kingdom oracles were mostly concerned with the succession of the pharaoh.<sup>202</sup> The XVIII<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Morenz 1973, 89.

<sup>199</sup> Assmann 2002, 230.

<sup>200</sup> Assmann 2002, 237.

<sup>201</sup> Assmann 2002, 239

<sup>202</sup> See above, p. 61

dynasty saw at least three pharaohs ascend the throne who claimed that they had been chosen specially by Amun-Ra. By the Ramesside period, the populace was expected, and even encouraged, to consult the god personally.<sup>203</sup>



**Figure 36.** Stela depicting a person consulting an oracle. From Klotz 2006, pg. 284.

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<sup>203</sup> Karlshausen 2009, 315.



A scene on a stela has been preserved which may represent how the idea of personal piety was interconnected with the sacred barques (Fig. 36). The limestone stela dates to sometime between the reignal years 16-29 of Ramesses III.<sup>204</sup> The stela is not actually carved, but rather drafted in red ink. It depicts people petitioning the portable shrine of Amun, but the petitioners used unusual phrasing by calling out to Amun in their “hour of troubles.”<sup>205</sup> This could indicate that during this period in the XX<sup>th</sup> dynasty people were more accustomed to presenting the god with their personal problems.

The stela could also be a reflection of the changing attitudes to *Ma'at*. The gods were now seen as authority figures who dispensed justice depending on a person's actions. *Ma'at* was no longer seen as just an abstract concept that dictated whether or not people experienced the divine in the afterlife. It was now an extension of the god's will which punished or rewarded a person according to one's behavior.<sup>206</sup>

The idea of personal piety that came about during the New Kingdom was always closely related to the peoples' interactions with the god through portable ship shrines. These ship shrines as well as the larger *Amun-Userhet* allowed the populace of Thebes to engage in controlled interactions with the god outside of the temple grounds, but still surrounded in its protection.

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<sup>204</sup> Klotz 2006, 270.

<sup>205</sup> Klotz 2006, 283.

<sup>206</sup> Assmann 2002, 240.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Changes in the philosophy of the state religion in New Kingdom Egypt brought the gods out of temples and put them in the streets of the city. The divine was no longer a mysterious force shrouded in the inner sanctums of temples closed to the public. The gods walked among the populace in the streets, albeit still shrouded.

The Opet festival was a convergence of religion and a display of state power. It started out as a festival to renew and reinforce the king's role as intermediary between the gods and the populace of Egypt. By the end of its long history, it served as an opportunity for people to interact with the god in a direct, but still controlled and protected manner.

The *Amun-Userhet* was the key to both the pharaoh and the populace connecting with the gods. The larger riverine barge was an extension of the temple, which allowed the god to exit his home still protected. The smaller boat shrine was an extension of the *Amun-Userhet*, which allowed the god to contact the populace and let his will be known within the proper safety of the temple.

The iconography of the ship played an important part not just during the festival, but throughout the year. The symbols and images associated with the *Amun-Userhet* were part of a strict formula that reinforced the idea that the ship was a tool used to fuse royal and divine power. Each symbol included in the images of the ship reflected either divine or royal power or a combination of the two. When it sailed down the Nile, it would have been a tangible reminder to the people of Thebes that the pharaoh was their

connection to the divine. The portable shrines, which contained the same imagery allowed the populace to have a more direct connection to the god while still reinforcing the idea that the pharaoh was an intermediary.

The written accounts describing the *Amun-Userhet* support the iconographic depictions, as do the few archaeological remains that have been found. The written accounts reinforce the *Amun-Userhet* as an enormous ship lavishly decorated. This was a vessel meant to be seen and admired.

The use of watercraft as an intermediary was a natural progression for the Egyptians. Boats played an important part in all aspects of their lives. They were used as transportation in the real world as well as in the afterlife. These vessels provided protection from the dangers of the Nile while allowing the people to reap its benefits. In the afterlife, souls were ferried to the land of the dead on ships as well. The use of boats for protection against unpredictable divine power would have been a natural extension of their practical uses.

The oracles that became such an important part of the Opet festival were communicated through these boat shrines. These oracles were used to preserve the idea of *Ma'at* much like the festival that utilized the larger *Amun-Userhet*. During the early part of the New Kingdom, the oracles were most concerned with the succession of pharaohs, but in later periods they were used to settle legal disputes and other common matters. The use of oracles paralleled the rise of the concept of more personal deity in Egypt.

The idea of ship processions is one of the few survivors of the Opet festival in modern Egypt. The modern city of Luxor still celebrates a festival that involves a parade with multiple ships on carts pulled through the streets. There are several other parallels including cloth covering the ships and a mock wedding which hint at the fact that this may be influenced by the ancient celebration. The ships are the most striking and obvious, but this is still not a direct parallel of the pharaonic festival; it is simply a distant echo.

The evolution of the ancient Egyptians relationship with their deities can be tracked through the use of the *Amun-Userhet* and its smaller version. The deities came closer to the general population through ever shrinking vessels. Much like the gods, the ships of the Opet festival played an increasingly intimate role in the lives of the people.

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