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Sources of History

Continuity at Luxor Temple

By Matthew Unruh

The ancient Egyptians were bound, heart and soul, to the Nile Valley and the seemingly eternal cycle of the annual inundation of the Nile's floodplains that sustained their crops. This lifestyle spanned millennia¹ and led to the Egyptians valuing an eternal order which embodied continuity in culture and religious tradition, despite shifting political allegiances and foreign conquest. The continuity of this order across ancient Egyptian history remains on full display at the New Kingdom Temple at Luxor to this very day. The temple was created for the primary purpose of preserving and expressing continuity in order, culture, and tradition of kingship, through the concept of the Royal *Ka*. For its part, the concept of the *Ka* was manifest in an imposing display of power and authority through the conduit of the temple's grand architectural design. Luxor temple was the metaphorical embodiment of a king's *Ka*, and the *Ka* in turn granted that king the right to rule the Two Lands² and bring about *Ma'at*,³ which was fundamental to the ideological foundation of ancient Egyptian society. These themes are exemplified in the court of Ramesses II at the front of the temple. This court, with its massive pylons and obelisks, demonstrated a deep desire on the part the Ramesses II to

¹ The history of Ancient Egypt spans a vast period with the first dynasty beginning in around 3000 BCE. When Julius Caesar gazed upon the pyramids with Cleopatra in the first-century BCE, they are already well over 2,000 years old, which puts their construction further away from Caesar's time than Caesar is from our own.

² Ancient Egyptians conceptualized their world as Two Lands. Upper Egypt is the thin strip of the Nile Valley, while Lower Egypt is the river delta that widens. It was the king's job to keep the two lands unified as one Egypt. The dualism of the Two Lands remained a constant motif in Egyptian governance and society.

³ *Ma'at* is the concept of eternal order, which the king was tasked with preserving within the Egyptian state. Keeping the two lands unified was a primary goal of upholding *Ma'at*.

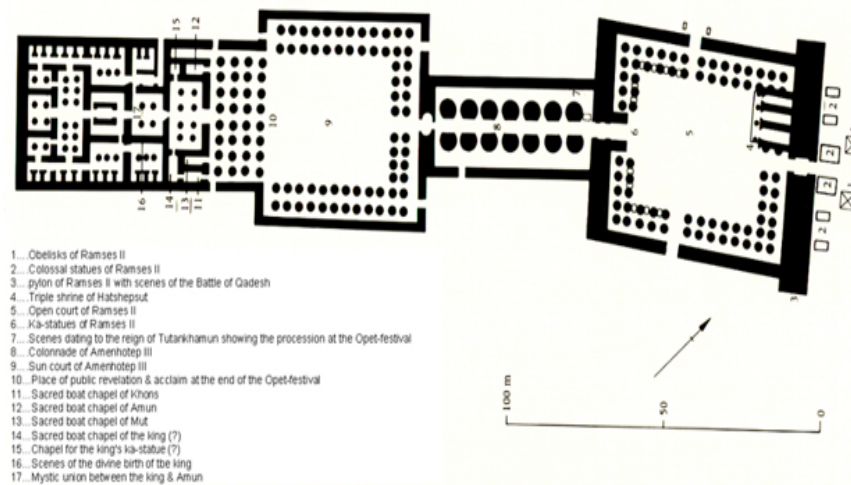
legitimize his rule by establishing continuity with Egyptian history and religion through the expression of his *Ka*.

The Importance of Luxor Temple

Deciphering the enigma of Luxor Temple can be surprisingly difficult. The temple is not dedicated to the cult of a specific deity, which would have its own orthodoxy, but to an abstract concept of kingship, and the Royal *Ka* itself. The temple was constructed over the span of two hundred years with the oversight of various kings from both the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties. Hatshepsut (r. 1479–1458 BCE) constructed the barque⁴ shrines on the Opet Festival procession route from Karnak Temple to the site of Luxor. Luxor's prominence on the Opet Festival route indicates that the site was already considered holy, even before the construction of the great stone temple commenced. The three primary kings who constructed the stone temple were Amenhotep III (r. 1386–1349 BCE), Tutankhamun (r. 1332–1323 BCE), and Ramesses II (r. 1279–1213 BCE). Amenhotep III was responsible for the construction of the inner sanctuary as well as the magnificent sun court which currently resides at the center of the temple (figure 9 in the layout below). The temple existed in this form until Tutankhamun became king and had the colonnade, which connects the sun court to the court of Ramesses, constructed during his brief reign. The final additions to the temple complex were constructed by Ramesses II and include his eponymous court, two massive pylons, several *Ka* statues, such as the two in front of the pylons, and the two monolithic obelisks which greet visitors traveling to the temple from the avenue of sphinxes.⁵

⁴ Barques are boats that the Egyptian gods travelled in. These boats would be about six feet long with a shrine on top and the divine statue of the god would be in the shrine. Instead of sailing on the Nile, the barque was placed on carrying poles. Priests would carry the barque of the god along festival processional routes when the god needed to travel from one place to another. A barque shrine is the inner sanctum of the temple where the god's barque is parked when it is not travelling in festivals. Only the highest priests could enter the shrine.

⁵ Lanny Bell, "The New Kingdom Divine Temple: The Example of Luxor," in *Temples of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 147.



Luxor temple continuously served its ideological function from the time of its initial construction until the late Roman period. Even after Islamic Conquest, the site remained religiously significant, and a mosque was constructed in the Ramesses Court.⁶ In order to understand the temple's historical and cultural significance, it is necessary to explore its ideological function in greater detail. Lanny Bell, the premier Egyptologist on Luxor Temple, argues that the temple was intimately tied to the celebration and confirmation of the Royal *Ka* of the king.⁷ Celebration of the Royal *Ka* is omnipresent throughout the temple's design. As visitors approach the temple from the avenue of the sphinxes, they are greeted by two colossal statues of Ramesses II with their arms positioned outward as the indication of *Ka*. It is imperative to explore the principles of the concept of the *Ka* in Egyptian society if we desire to understand properly the way Luxor temple was used to reinforce the continuity of the culture, religion, and tradition in Egypt.

The Royal Ka

In its most basic form, the ancient Egyptian concept of the *Ka* was an abstraction of an individual's identity. Egyptians believed that

⁶ Monneret U. de Villard, "The Temple of the Imperial Cult at Luxor," *Archaeologia* 95, (1953): 91.

⁷ Lanny Bell, "Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44, no. 4 (1985): 259.

each person was composed of six parts; as one part, the *Ka* is a spirit's effective power. The *Ka* gave an individual a sense of belonging in their family, their clan, their gang or any other form of collective identity found within the social strata of Ancient Egypt.⁸ The Royal *Ka* of the king, however, was considered divine and thus manifests itself differently than the *Ka* of a commoner. The Royal *Ka* was thought to pass from king to king, maintaining the continuity of kingship through various royal lines. Lanny Bell described the Royal *Ka* as “the central, dynamic principle underlying Egypt's social, political, and economic structures... According to the doctrine, kingship was ordained by the gods at the beginning of time in accordance with *Ma'at*. The integration of politics and religion had been divinely prescribed, and the sovereign wielded both temporal and spiritual power.”⁹ There was a clear and conscious attempt by the kings who built Luxor Temple to tie themselves irrevocably to the continuity of tradition and kingship that Egyptians found so important to their existence.

The Evidence

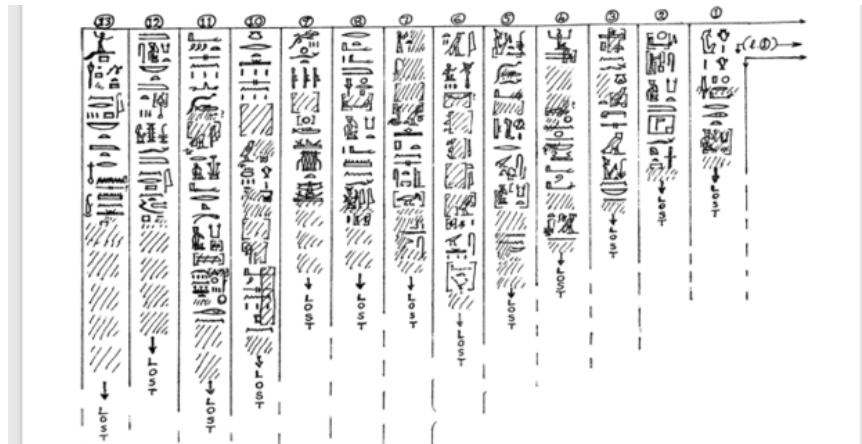
In addition to archeological evidence, there is considerable textual evidence carved on the walls of the temple of the kings attempting to tie themselves to the narrative of continuity. When translated into English, the texts on the walls seem quite prosaic; nonetheless, the reader can sense the awe these kings sought to elicit from all who bore witness to their temple and its festivals. For example, “He thus knew the secrets of heaven and all the mysteries of earth. He found Thebes, the Eye of Ra, as a primeval mound which arose at the beginning... The king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Amen-Ra. Eternity is his Name, and Everlasting is his Nature, and his *Ka* is all that exists.”¹⁰ Here we find a direct connection being made with the creation myth of the Egyptians,¹¹ as well as references to the eternal and everlasting nature of Egypt and the king's *Ka*.

⁸ Bell, “The Example of Luxor,” 131.

⁹ Ibid. 138.

¹⁰ Mahmud El-Razik, “The Dedicatory and Building Texts of Ramesses II in Luxor Temple: I: The Texts.” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 60, no. 1 (1974): 143.

¹¹ The Ancient Egyptians believed a primeval mound arose from the primordial oceans of the earth as part of the creation of the world.



Hieroglyphs found on the walls of the court of Ramesses as detailed by El-Razik.¹²

This nature of the Royal *Ka* is crucial to Egyptian kingship in this period. Due to the fact, the temple was constructed over the course of several generations, under two different dynasties, establishing a narrative of continuity of royal authority was necessary to legitimize the new dynasty's rule.¹³ After a brief period of turmoil following the death of King Tutankhamun in 1323 BCE, Egypt was stabilized by the non-royal King Horemheb (r. 1306–1292), who died without an heir and passed the throne to another non-royal official, Ramesses I who subsequently established the nineteenth dynasty. Due to the lack of royal blood, the ascendancy of the nineteenth dynasty sparked an instantaneous legitimacy crisis. Consider the severity of this crisis in light of R. T. Rundle Clark's description of the Egyptian conceptualization of kingship:

The kingship of Egypt...consisted of a duality—it was based on a relationship between the living and the dead. The king exercised the supreme power in the world. He was the intermediary whereby the divine energies of the universe were made available for men. This power he derived from his ancestors, in particular, his father who for this reason was considered as himself divine. The deceased father in his tomb

¹² El-Razik, "Luxor Temple: I: The Texts," 145.

¹³ Bell, "Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka," 258.

was the source of the power called by the Egyptians the Ka.¹⁴

For ancient Egyptians, there was a fundamental problem if the king had no royal blood flowing through his veins. To remedy this legitimacy crisis, Ramesses I and his successors sought to affirm the presence of the Royal *Ka* in their being by confirmation at Luxor Temple during the Opet festival.

The Historical Context of the Temple

The Egyptians were searching for a way to explain the reigns of kings like Hatshepsut,¹⁵ Horemheb, and Ramesses I. They were exceptional because Hatshepsut was a woman, and Horemheb as well as Ramesses, were generals with no divine blood in their veins. It was in this historical context that Luxor temple was constructed. The nineteenth dynasty was trying to ignore the religious turmoil of the Amarna period that preceded their reign, so they propagandized the idea that Horemheb truly had the *Ka* born with him, as Lanny Bell aptly observes, “To the victor goes the spoils and to the survivor the ka.”¹⁶ The way the *Ka* was displayed and affirmed to the world was through the Opet festival that took place in Luxor Temple. The Opet festival was the highpoint of religious life at the temple and was likely the most important public and religious function during the year.¹⁷ During each year’s festival, the divine aspect of the king was identified and confirmed. “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 at Karnak, and the re-creation of the cosmos.”¹⁸ Again, we are presented with the idea of continuity of the old with the new. Just consider all the words with the prefix ‘re’ used in that description of the Opet festival’s function; regeneration, rebirth, re-creation. Everything old is new again, generation, birth and creation happening repeatedly and in perpetuity. Themes of continuity through the

¹⁴ Robert T. R. Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1959), 107.

¹⁵ Hatshepsut was a woman who was king, but the Egyptians’ concepts of monarchy did not allow for a female to be king.

¹⁶ Bell, “Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka,” 258.

¹⁷ Bell, “The Example of Luxor,” 157

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

regenerative process are abundant in the Opet festival and the temple itself.

Celebration and Confirmation of the Ka, The Opet Festival

The Opet festival was spiritually associated with the Theban triad of gods, Amun-Re, Mut, and Khonsu. Surviving inscriptions and reliefs on the colonnade of Tutankhamun provide a description of the procession of the Opet festival. The west wall depicts the procession to Luxor from Karnak, and the east wall illustrates its return, which is essentially the same but in the opposite order.¹⁹ From the reliefs in the temple itself, we can reconstruct the procession and its various rituals and explain how they, in turn, related to the regeneration and confirmation of the Royal *Ka* of the king. In the first scenes of the reliefs, the king travels with the royal barque and pays homage to the Theban triad while the barque rests on pedestals within the barque shrine. It is interesting to consider the position of the barque sanctuaries on the route to Luxor Temple from Karnak. The king was carried in his barque by a procession of servants. Consequently, pauses in the procession at the shrines were necessary to allow the men carrying the barque an opportunity to rest and recover, or to allow onlookers to gaze upon the king for a brief time. Either way, these way stations on the route to Luxor were built by Hatshepsut demonstrates the fact that Luxor was already religiously significant before the construction of the stone temple.²⁰

By the time of Ramesses II, the procession arrived by boat from Karnak, and when it finally reached Luxor Temple, they would disembark at the temple dock and proceed through the water gate on the west side of the temple. It is difficult to say whether we should derive any significance from the mode of travel to and from Luxor and Karnak temple. It seems the means of travel was entirely the prerogative of the king.²¹ When the procession entered the court of Ramesses II, the barque of the king was placed in its sanctuary, and more rituals were performed. Dedicatory texts on the walls of the court of Ramesses describes the structure as, “A

¹⁹ William J. Murnane, “La grande fete d’Opet,” *Dossiers Histoire et Archeologie* 101, 22-25

²⁰ Bell, “The Example of Luxor.” 148

²¹ *Ibid.* 162

resting-place for the Lord of the Gods in his Festival of Opet in which to make his halts at the beginning of every ten days. He made [it] for him upon the right ground, the precinct of the first occasion (primeval time), a place of supplication of hearing the petitions of Gods and men, which the Son of Re Ramesses II Meryamun, has made for him.”²² What is particularly fascinating about this inscription is that it seemingly suggests a public function for Luxor Temple, as a “place of supplication” and hearing the petitions of men.²³ It is also worth noting that, like other kings before him, Ramesses II claimed to be the son of Amun-Re, and thus of divine blood. The declaration of Ramesses II’s divine heritage is important, because it exemplifies the way in which the nineteenth dynasty sought to legitimize their rule by portraying themselves as a continuation of the traditional concept of the *Ka*.

It is likely Ramesses II would have made this procession and dedication several times in his reign. His court at Luxor Temple was completed quickly, perhaps within the first three years of his reign. The speed of the construction suggests has led some scholars to suggest that the construction of the Ramesses court at Luxor might have been initiated by his father, Seti I.²⁴ Regardless of whether the court was the brainchild of Seti I or Ramesses II, it’s critical role in underpinning the legitimacy of the dynasty remained the same. After the Opet rituals were performed in the Court of Ramesses, the procession would move through the colonnade, into the sun court, and then proceed to its final destination in the temple, the inner barque sanctuary where the Royal *Ka* would be confirmed to exist in the body and spirit of the king.

Foreign Perspectives and use of Luxor Temple

The political value of the Opet festival was not lost upon foreign conquerors who governed Egypt for much of the Classical and Late-Antique periods. Alexander the Great (c. 332 BCE) had the

²² Mahmud El-Razik, “The Dedicatory and Building Texts of Ramesses II in Luxor Temple II: Interpretation,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 61, no. 1 (1975): 128.

²³ *Ibid.*, 128

²⁴ D. B. Redford, “The Earliest Years of Ramesses II, and the Building of the Ramesside Court at Luxor,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 57, no. 1 (1971): 118.

barque shrine in the inner sanctuary rebuilt in his name and adorned with his dynastic decorations.²⁵ The striking contrast between Alexander's Hellenistic decorations and the thousand-year-old dedications of Amenhotep III which still surrounded the barque sanctuary must have been extraordinary to behold. Bearing the importance of the theme of historical and cultural continuity within Egyptian society in mind, it comes as no surprise Alexander sought to tap into those rituals in order to confirm his legitimacy as the rightful ruler of Egypt. In order to capitalize on this tradition, Alexander underwrote the construction of a new inner barque shrine within the temple, which was the holiest wing of the temple and essential to both the rites of the Opet festival, and the concept of the Royal *Ka*. Alexander and his agents were keen to recognize the spiritual significance of Luxor Temple as a place where divine kingship was affirmed and incorporate it into their governance of Egypt.

The Romans were quick to capitalize on the cultural and spiritual significance of the temple as well. French Egyptologist Monneret de Villard believed that there may have been monumental paintings deifying the Roman Emperors inside the temple but unfortunately the frescos were destroyed during the original excavation at the temple in 1886.²⁶ The little that remains seems to portray two Augusti and two Caesars of the tetrarchy period of Imperial administration during the late fourth-century CE. What is interesting to note about these paintings is that they propagate the notion of divine kingship as official policy in the Roman Empire. Even 1600 years after the final construction the temple's original purpose was still tangentially on display from a Roman point of view.

Evidence for cultural and religious continuity in Luxor Temple is abundant in the inscriptions and reliefs that grace the walls and columns of the temple. The effort the kings and Conquerors of Egypt went through to perpetuate that continuity was extraordinary. The temple and the ideology it embodied emerged during a unique period in Egyptian history where the right of a king to rule had come into question. Not the necessity of a king, for the temple makes it very clear kingship and the *Ka* are eternal, but rather who possessed the *Ka*. In an Egypt where

²⁵ Bell, "The Example of Luxor," 156

²⁶ de Villard, "The Temple of the Imperial Cult at Luxor," 95, 101.

Horemheb could take control of the country without having any royal blood in his veins and then pass the throne to another non-royal, Ramesses I, it became necessary to demonstrate that kings such as Hatshepsut, Horemheb, and Ramesses I were legitimate rulers of Egypt. In essence, this process represented a conscious ideological re-adjustment of the concept of Egyptian kingship, and the nature of the Royal *Ka*. This adjustment was achieved by mobilizing the deep and profound continuities between Egyptian traditions and religion and the new nineteenth dynasty. In their efforts to redefine the nature of the Royal *Ka*, and employ long-standing Egyptian traditions to legitimize their rule, the nineteenth dynasty was wildly successful. In so doing, they also helped to perpetuate the breathtaking continuity between ancient Egyptian cultural practices, and the numerous foreign rulers who would follow. The nineteenth dynasty would fall in the eleventh-century BCE, but the cultural continuity they helped perpetuate would carry on for another millenium and a half.

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Author Bio

Matthew Unruh graduated with his BA in History in the Winter of 2018. He is a voracious reader and devours science fiction and fantasy novels almost as quickly as he reads history texts. Early on in his college career he was exposed to the philosophical works of Thomas Khun, and has spent the majority of his time at the university developing historiography as a means to explain history and other disciplines outside the bounds of contemporary postmodernism. He hopes to one day be a professor, like so many of those professors who have inspired him and his work.



