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# Ancient Egyptian Temple Ritual

Performance, Pattern, and Practice

Katherine Eaton

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# Ancient Egyptian Temple Ritual

There are few books dedicated to religious practice in ancient Egypt, and this book is a welcome addition. It explores the structure of ritual performance in ancient Egyptian temples and makes it broadly accessible.

—Geoffrey Tassie, *University College London, UK*

Large state temples in ancient Egypt were vast agricultural estates, with interests in mining, trading, and other economic activities. The temple itself served as the mansion or palace of the deity to whom the estate belonged, and much of the ritual in temples was devoted to offering a representative sample of goods to the gods. After ritual performances, produce was paid as wages to priests and temple staff and presented as offerings to private mortuary establishments. This redistribution became a daily ritual in which many basic necessities of life for elite Egyptians were produced.

This book evaluates the influence of common temple rituals not only on the day-to-day lives of ancient Egyptians, but also on their special events, economics, and politics. Author Katherine Eaton argues that a study of these daily rites ought to be the first step in analyzing the structure of more complex societal processes.

**Katherine Eaton** is an Egyptologist in the University of Sydney's Department of Studies in Religion. Since receiving her Ph.D. from New York University in 2004, she has published in top journals, including *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* and *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*.

## **Routledge Studies in Egyptology**

### **1 Ancient Egyptian Temple Ritual** Performance, Pattern, and Practice *Katherine Eaton*

**To Dominic and Liam**

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Part I

# Foundation





# 1 Introduction

## Temples in Ancient Egyptian Society, Economy, and Cosmos

This book focuses on ritual cycles in which simple offerings, such as food and clothing, were presented daily in ancient Egyptian temples. Divine statues were cleaned, dressed, and adorned in the “Daily Ritual” (the toilet, called the “Uncovering of the Face” by the ancient Egyptians). Divinities and ancestors were fed during the “Ritual of the Royal Ancestors” (the meal, also called “Ritual of Amenhotep I”). Drawing on textual, art historical, architectural, and archaeological material, most of this book addresses questions about reading representations of ritual and the logistics of performing cult in ancient Egyptian temples. The meanings of ritual episodes shifted in different contexts. Thus, this first chapter explores the place of ancient Egyptian temples within the broader ancient Egyptian society, economy, and cosmos.

Today the two primary uses of ancient Egyptian temples are as archaeological sites and tourist attractions. Although both of these uses were known in ancient times, they were neither the primary functions (*Funktion*) for which temples were designed and built, nor the main uses (*Gebrauch*) to which they were ultimately put by the ancient Egyptians (Haring and Klug 2007). Temples were a “. . . locus for architectural, visual, verbal and performance arts” (Baines 1997:216). They were both the body of the god, and the body of his mother, with the sanctuary representing the womb. The later association was manifest in the personification of temples as goddesses receiving cult in ritual scenes (Refai 2002:299–303) and in the literal translation of the goddess Hathor’s name, “House of (her son) Horus” (Troy 1986:21–22). *The Temple in Man* (Schwaller de Lubicz 1949 and 1981) represents the outer limits of analysis of the relationship between ancient Egyptian temples and human bodies from an Egyptological perspective, although many mystical interpretations of ancient Egyptian temples go even further (Baines 1990:2–3). However, the roles of temples as divine palaces and models of the cosmos had the greatest impact on the architectural, decorative, and ritual structures forming the focus of the present study. Finnestadt described these two aspects as “the warp and the weft” of the metaphorical and symbolical meanings of Egyptian temples (1985:3). In both of these aspects, the temple served as a protected locus for communication between