

Tradition and innovation within the decoration program of the temple of Ramesses II at Gerf Hussein

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Abstract

The temple at Gerf Hussein is closely related to the other Lower Nubian speoi of Ramesses II, especially at Abu Simbel, Derr, and Wadi es-Sebua. Like in these earlier temples the gods of the so-called state-triad dominated the temple concept. Important topics therefore were creation and regeneration, as well as the religious and political unity of Egypt. The temple at Gerf Hussein completed the re-structuring of the northern Nubian ritual landscape during the reign of Ramesses II. In each one of the four huge Nubian speoi sacred kingship ideology was an intrinsic part of the temple concept, but the way in which the divine Ramesses dominated the whole decoration program at Gerf Hussein was unprecedented. The most remarkable feature is the predominance of divine groups (mainly triads and quads), no less than 21 of these are to be found along the main axis of the temple. Different divine manifestations of the king are almost always part of these groups. Their multiplicity and variety is another distinct aspect of the temple at Gerf Hussein. Closely related to the king are also the so-called 'gods/goddesses of Ramesses' which play a prominent role within the temple's theology.

Keywords

Gerf Hussein; Ramesses II; divine kingship; temple; Lower Nubia

The temple at Gerf Hussein was built late in the reign of Ramesses II as the last of the huge rock-cut sanctuaries in Lower Nubia (Hein 1991: 9–11). It was situated on a slope near the river on the west bank, about 100km south of Aswan. Its architectural layout, as well as its decoration program, is closely related to the other Lower Nubian speoi of Ramesses II, especially at Abu Simbel, Derr, and Wadi es-Sebua (Hein 1991: 113–28). But at the same time the temple at Gerf Hussein displays a distinct character with a high degree of innovation within its two- and three-dimensional decoration program. In the following I will mainly focus on these innovative features in order to work out important aspects of the theological concept which underlies the temple at Gerf Hussein.¹

Contrary to the other well-preserved temples of Ramesses II in Beit el-Wali, Wadi es-Sebua, Derr, and Abu Simbel, the monument at Gerf Hussein was not relocated in the 1960s to rescue it from the rising waters of Lake Nasser. The planned dismantling failed due to the bad quality of the local sandstone and the shortness of time. In 1964 only the pillars and columns of the courtyard, together with the so-called Osiride pillar-statues, 22 blocks from the pillared hall and another Osiride pillar-statue and an architrave from the hall, were removed: the rest of the temple vanished below the waters of Lake Nasser. In 2002 the rescued parts of the temple were rebuilt in New-Kalabsha (Hawass 2004: 51–120). The Osiride pillar-statue and the architrave from the hall have been on display in the Nubian Museum in Aswan since several years.²

¹ The article relies on the Habilitation thesis of the author (Ullmann 2007), which is currently prepared for publication.

² Unfortunately the temple was never published completely. The *Centre Egyptien de Documentation et d'Etudes sur l'Histoire de l'Art et de la Civilisation de l'Egypte Ancienne* cleaned and documented the site (1961–1964), but only four of the planned five volumes have appeared, and that means that the decoration of the innermost part of the temple, to the west of the hall, is only known fragmentarily. I wish to thank the colleagues at the Documentation Center of the MSA for enabling me to study the b/w photographic material of the temple, which is kept in the offices at Zamalek. Furthermore, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Martin Davies, Bristol, who provided me very generously with copies of his coloured photos of the temple, taken in 1962 and 1964. In December 2016 I had the opportunity to

Layout of the temple

The temple at Gerf Hussein was a 65m-deep hemispeos along an east-west ritual axis (Jacquet and el-Achirie 1978; el-Tanbouli (n/d)). The pylon and courtyard had been cut freestanding into the rock. There were colonnades at both longitudinal sides, each with four Osiride pillar-statues, about 4m high, displaying different manifestations of the divine Ramesses II.

Behind the terrace at the rear part of the courtyard the underground section of the temple began (see Figure 1). First came an almost square pillared hall (about 13 x 13m and almost 7.5m high in the center), with two rows each of three Osiride pillar-statues. On both side walls, about 1m above the ground floor, four niches had been cut, each about 2.15m high and almost 2m wide. Each of the eight niches contained a triad in half relief (see Figure 2). Unfortunately nothing was left of this unique assemblage of statue groups that clearly dominated the decoration program of the main hall.

Behind the hall a transverse room with two pillars was to be found, from which five rooms went off: one each to the north and south and three to the west. The sanctuary in the center was dominated by a huge statue group in half relief on the rear wall, showing the divine Ramesses II enthroned between Ptah, Ptah-Tatenen, and Hathor.

The ground plan of the temple at Gerf Hussein followed a pattern which is well known from the barque-procession temples of the New Kingdom. With the great speos at Abu Simbel, designed in the very early years of Ramesses II, this style of temple layout had been transferred for the first time to a rock-cut temple. Basically, the same ground plan was then used for the temples at Derr, Wadi es-Sebua, and Gerf Hussein (compare the ground plans in Hein 1991: Tafel 21, and see Hein 1991: 113–18).

examine parts of the documentation of the innermost part of the temple, which had surfaced in the Documentation Center, thanks to Dr Hisham el-Leithy and Prof. Ali Radwan. Volume no. 5 of the temple of Gerf Hussein is currently under preparation by the Documentation Center.

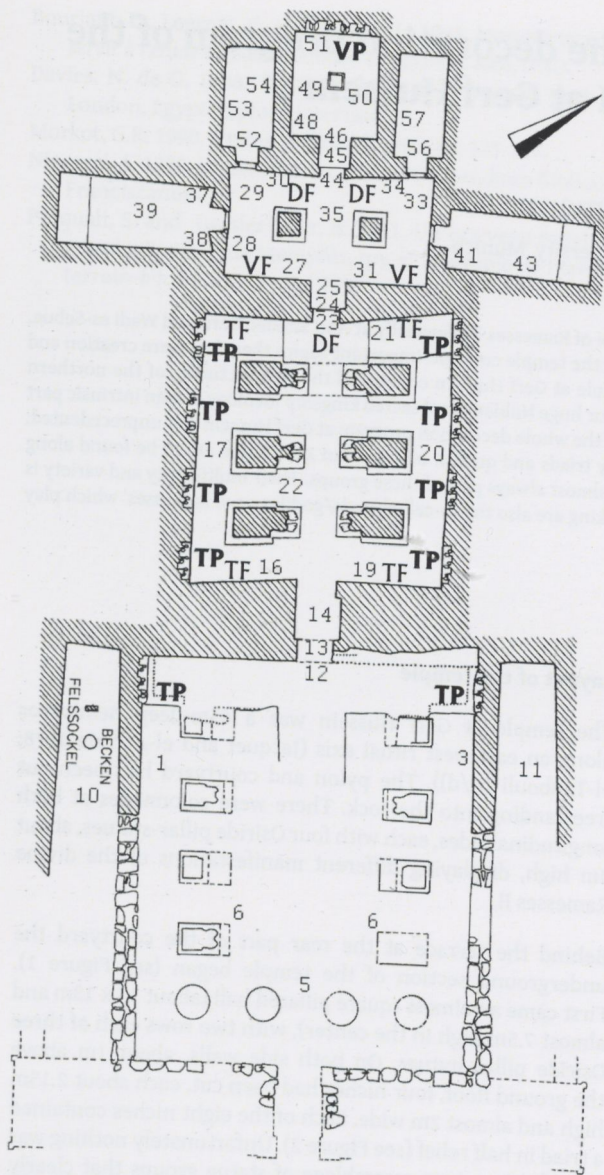


FIGURE 1: PLAN OF THE TEMPLE AT GERF HUSSEIN, WITH INDICATION OF DIVINE GROUPS (TP = TRIAD, THREE-DIMENSIONAL; VP = QUAD, THREE-DIMENSIONAL; DF = DYAD, TWO-DIMENSIONAL; TF = TRIAD, TWO-DIMENSIONAL; VF = QUAD, TWO-DIMENSIONAL) (© ULLMANN 2007, AFTER HEIN 1991: 182, TAFEL 2).

The rear parts of these later three temples indicate an independent development, starting at Derr with two side-rooms flanking the sanctuary and being further evolved at Wadi es-Sebua and Gerf Hussein with two more lateral rooms to the north and south of the transverse hall in front of the sanctuary.³ These rooms should not be interpreted as secondary cult places for various deities. Based upon the analysis of the evolution of the architectural structure and the decoration program – which is well preserved at Derr and at Wadi es-Sebua – not a real cultic function, but instead a more abstract theological function can be postulated (Lurson 2007; Ullmann 2016b). These lateral rooms, which surrounded the sanctuary in the center, provided more space for displaying

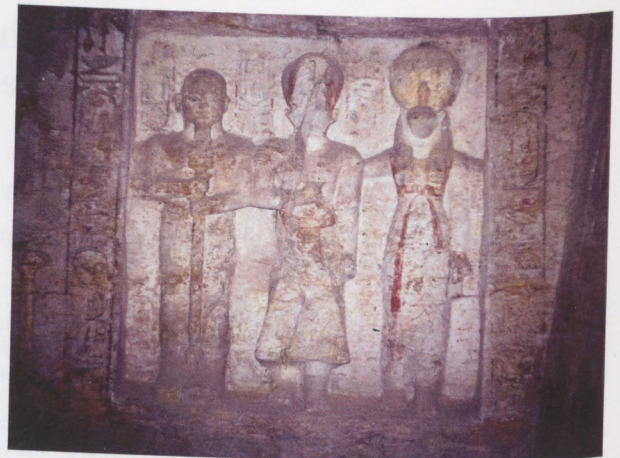


FIGURE 2: SOUTH WALL, NICHE 4: PTAH – RAMESSES – SAKHMET (PHOTO (1962): © MARTIN DAVIES, BRISTOL).

a number of theological aspects within the decoration programs of the temples in question. Of special importance is the topic of ‘creation and regeneration’ in connection with the gods of the so-called state-triad – i.e. Amun-Ra, Ra-Horakhty, and Ptah – and including sacred kingship. These themes were associated with the myth of the return of the distant goddess from Nubia and the Nile inundation coming to Egypt from the south.

Theological concept and ritual function

The many similarities in the layout of the great speos at Abu Simbel and the later temples at Derr, Wadi es-Sebua, and Gerf Hussein point to a common basic theological concept and ritual function for all four temples. One also has to keep in mind that by their designation as *hw.t*, *hw.t-ntr* or *pr* of Ramesses all these sanctuaries were royal temples. The main feature of each of these temples was the linking up of the cult of the respective main deity with the one of the sacred king, in order to maintain in endless renewal the divine order of the cosmos, together with the eternal rule of the king (Ullmann 2002; Ullmann 2016a). The focal point of all four temples is a huge statue-group in half relief at the rear wall of each of the sanctuaries, displaying the divine king together with the main deities – at Abu Simbel and at Derr these are Ra-Horakhty, Amun-Ra, and Ptah, at Wadi es-Sebua we find Ra-Horakhty and Amun-Ra, and at Gerf Hussein Ptah, Ptah-Tatenen, and Hathor (Hein 1991; Ullmann 2013). In the center of the festival rituals stood processions with the barque of the main deity – Amun-Ra at Abu Simbel and at Wadi es-Sebua, Ra-Horakhty at Derr, and Ptah at Gerf Hussein – together with the barque of the divine Ramesses. The special iconography of this royal barque, with the falcon heads at prow and stern, had been invented for Abu Simbel and was also used in the three later temples. It emphasizes the divine Horus aspect of the king and associates him visually with the falcon-headed sun-god Ra-Horakhty (Habachi 1969: 4–6; Karlshausen 2009: 108–9; Ullmann 2011: 312).

Apart from the royal barque, the divine kingship ideology is primarily expressed by displaying different divine manifestations of the king that are very often part of two- and three-dimensional divine groups, or who are shown as Osiride pillar-statues.⁴

³ For these rooms at Derr and Wadi es-Sebua, see Lurson 2007.

⁴ For the wall decoration and the statuary of the temple at Gerf

The composition of the deities within the groups is mainly determined by a common cult-topographical background – Ptah and Sakhmet, as well as Ptah-Tatenen and Hathor, are worshipped together at Memphis; Amun and Mut form the divine couple at Thebes; Khnum, Anuket, and Satet are the triad of the 1st Cataract region; the Horusses of Baki, Buhen, and Miam are the local Lower Nubian forms of Horus, going back to the Middle Kingdom. The constellation Onuris-Shu – Ramesses – Sakhmet – Nekhbet refers to the myth of the return of the sun-eye from Nubia to Egypt.

The distribution of the eight three-dimensional triads in the niches of the hall (see Figure 3), which clearly dominate the decoration system of this part of the temple, is arranged in a very sophisticated way, according to the principles of linear sequence, axial symmetry, and diagonal disposition (see also Lurson 2000). Each row of the triads starts with one of the country-wide most important gods: Amun-Ra in the south and Ra-Horakhty in the north. Corresponding to their leading roles in the contemporary theology, they head the other groups; on both sides follow groups with the locally important Lower Nubian forms of Horus. Niches 3 and 4 in the south are focused on the most important deities within the temple of Gerf Hussein. The doubling adds special weight to them. The arrangement of the deities from east to west, that is from outside to inside, becomes more and more focused on a cult-topographical level, from across Egypt, to Lower Nubia, to the specific cult site at Gerf Hussein.

Niche 7 on the north wall seems to be diagonally connected to niche 4 on the south, by displaying Nefertem, the child-god of the Memphite divine couple Ptah and Sakhmet. At the same time it is associated with the neighboring niche 8, by showing Satet, who is part of the divine triad of Elephantine, and whose other members – Khnum and Anuket – are to be seen in niche 8.

Additional levels of meaning for the eight triads are connected with the king: three times the so-called ‘gods/goddesses of Ramesses’ are displayed – Mut of Ramesses, Ptah of Ramesses, and Anuket of Ramesses. They are to be understood as special forms of these deities, who are closely associated with the divine king. The ‘Ptah of Ramesses’ is the form of Ptah, who was venerated in the sanctuary of the temple (according to its appearance in the quad on the rear wall), and this sufficiently explains the appearance in the westernmost triad of the southern row. Mut and Anuket of Ramesses are not known from anywhere else. They are diagonally connected to each other and frame the statue groups of both rows from the eastern and western end, thus emphasizing the divine king.

The distribution of the different divine manifestations of Ramesses within the triads is meaningful too. The divine manifestation named ‘(Ramesses, beloved of Amun) the great god’ ($(R^c\text{-msj-sw } mrj\text{-Jmn}) p3 \text{ ntr } \textcircled{3}$) or ‘(Mighty is the Maat of Ra, chosen by Ra) the god’ ($(Wsr\text{-M}^3\text{c.t-R}^c \text{stp.n-R}^c) p3 \text{ ntr}$), which states the divinity of the king quite plainly, is to be found within the first groups of each row together with the most important deities – Amun-Ra and Ra-Horakhty. Since niche 8, the last one in the north, shows again ‘(Ramesses, beloved of Amun) the god’ ($(R^c\text{-msj-sw } mrj\text{-Jmn}) p3 \text{ ntr}$), the other divine manifestations of the king appear to be framed by it. Ramesses, the god, visually embraces all the other divine manifestations of the king.

In four instances the divine Ramesses is called ‘(Ramesses, beloved of Amun) within the *pr* of Ptah/Amun /Ra’ ($(R^c\text{-msj-sw } mrj\text{-Jmn}) m \text{ pr } Pth/Jmn/R^c$). The divinity of the king is thereby expressed by localizing him within the sanctuary of a specific god. Again we observe how stress is laid upon Ptah by doubling the divine manifestation called ‘(Ramesses, beloved of Amun) within the *pr* of Ptah’. And in the southern row the sanctuaries of the gods of the so-called state-triad follow upon each other, which cannot be accidental.

The composition and distribution of the divine groups point towards Ptah and Ptah-Tatenen as being the most important deities in the temple, supplemented by Hathor and, to a lesser degree, Sakhmet. This is confirmed by other parts of the decoration and by the designation of the temple as ‘temple of (Ramesses, beloved of Amun) (within) the *pr* of Ptah’ ($(hw.t\text{-ntr } (R^c\text{-msj-sw } mrj\text{-Jmn}) (m) \text{ pr } Pth)$), or shortened as ‘*pr* Ptah’. Furthermore, Amun-Ra and Ra-Horakhty play important roles. Thus the gods of the so-called state-triad – Ptah/Ptah-Tatenen, Amun-Ra, and Ra-Horakhty-Atum – dominate the divine groups and this holds true for the theological concept of the temple in general.⁶

Throughout the decoration of the temple this triad was formed by different means and in varying functional relationships. Just two examples from many shall be referenced here. The four two-dimensional triads in the hall supplement each other to form the state-triad, by stressing at the same time Ptah/Ptah-Tatenen as the main deity within Gerf Hussein: on the east wall the group is led by Amun in the south and by Ra-Horakhty in the north; on the western wall by Ptah-Tatenen and Ptah respectively. The names of the three Osiride pillar-statues within the southern half of the hall are formed consecutively with Ptah, Atum, and Amun.

Different divine manifestations of the king are part of almost all the divine groups at Gerf Hussein. Within all 14 triads Ramesses takes the position in the center. The divine groups demonstrate thereby very vividly the integration of the king into the divine sphere of the Egyptian gods and goddesses. In almost all cases the scenic or architectural context of the groups points to a cult-receiving function of its members. It is important to note that it is not the king as a human being who is represented as part of the groups, but instead, in each case, a divine manifestation of Ramesses, with a special designation, denoting some specific theological aspects of the sacred ruler.

Divine manifestations of Ramesses

It is well known that divine aspects of the king can be made independently by using epithets following the name of the king, which express his divinity (Yoyotte 1959; Habachi 1969; Wildung 1973a: 557–9; Wildung 1973b: 33–4; Manouvrier 1996: 464–548, especially 497–533; Brunner 1981: 101–6; Amer 1999: 1–7; Ullmann 2011: 305–10). These divine entities can manifest themselves in royal statues of various kinds, preferably colossal standing or striding statues, Osiride pillar-statues, standard-bearer statues, as parts of statue groups, and as portable cult images of the royal barques (so-called *sšmw-hw*’s of the king). Most probably those divine entities of a king have to be interpreted as forms of the royal Ka.

⁶ For the meaning and function of the so-called state-triad in the Lower Nubian temples of Ramesses II, see Ullmann 2013: 34–6.

In many New Kingdom temples, especially in royal ones, the integration of those divine manifestations of the king within the temple's theology and its rituals was an important part of its concept. This holds true for the temples of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel, Derr, Wadi es-Sebua, and Gerf Hussein alike, but the multiplicity of the divine manifestations of Ramesses and their dominance within the decoration program is another distinct aspect of the temple at Gerf Hussein. They are to be found materialized in Osiride pillar-statues (originally eight in the court and six in the hall), or as part of the two- and three-dimensional divine groups (see above) and in different visual and textual contexts throughout the temple. The most important of this latter group is the depiction of the royal barque in the sanctuary, whose cult image is designated as the *sšmw-hw* of (Ramesses, beloved of Amun) in the *pr* of Ptah' (*sšmw-hw (R^c-msj-sw mrj-Jmn) m pr Pth*).

The designations used for the divine manifestations of Ramesses in the temple at Gerf Hussein are manifold (11 different ones are identified), and in most cases we have proof for the entities in question from outside of Gerf Hussein also.⁷

Semantically, the divine manifestations of Ramesses at Gerf Hussein are focused on the association of the king with Ptah: '(Ramesses, beloved of Amun) who is favored like Ptah' (*(R^c-msj-sw mrj-Jmn) mrw.tj mj Pth*), '(Ramesses, beloved of Amun) great of favor like Ptah' (*(R^c-msj-sw mrj Jmn) wr mrw.t mj Pth*), '(Ramesses, beloved of Amun) enduring in the favor of Ptah-Neferher' (*(R^c-msj-sw mrj Jmn) mn mrw.t hr Pth nfr hr*). But by far the most important entity at Gerf Hussein is (Ramesses, beloved of Amun) in the *pr* of Ptah' (*(R^c-msj-sw mrj-Jmn) m pr Pth*), sometimes varied to '(Ramesses, beloved of Amun) in the *pr* of Ptah, the god/the great god' (*(R^c-msj-sw mrj-Jmn) m pr Pth p3 ntr/p3 ntr 3*). It is found at least 14 times within the temple and it dominates the processional way throughout the temple, which is shown by its distribution from the hall via the transverse room into the sanctuary, where not only the *sšmw-hw* of the king, but his statue within the divine group on the rear wall alike, referred to this divine manifestation of Ramesses. The *m pr* god NN-epithet was used also in connection with Ra and Amun. Thus, apart from the dominance of Ptah, we observe again the importance of the so-called state-triad.

By using the formula 'king NN beloved by god NN' Ramesses II was associated at Gerf Hussein with Tatenen (again stressing the connection with Memphite theology), with Atum, and with Amun.

The divine manifestations '(Ramesses, beloved of Amun) who emerges between the gods' (*(R^c-msj-sw mrj-Jmn) h'j m ntr.w*) and '(Ramesses, beloved of Amun) the god/the great god' (*(R^c-msj-sw mrj-Jmn) p3 ntr/p3 ntr 3*) are each identified several times. Here, an all-encompassing divinity of Ramesses II is stated, without singling out a specific aspect.

Gods/goddesses of Ramesses

We have already mentioned briefly the so-called 'gods/goddesses of Ramesses' (Habachi 1969: 44–5; Wildung 1973a: 559–60; Eaton-Krauss 1991: 15–22; Koch 1993: 370–1; Manouvrier 1996: 674–7; Gulyás 2003: 57–61; Römer 2004:

73–82). The extraordinary prominent role they play within the temple's theology is another distinct feature of the temple at Gerf Hussein. Six different deities of Ramesses are proven eight times in two- and/or three-dimensional form: 'Ptah of Ramesses' and 'Hathor of Ramesses' (each twice), 'Ptah-Tatenen of Ramesses', 'Amun of Ramesses', 'Mut of Ramesses', 'Anuket of Ramesses' (each once). Again we detect how stress was laid on the Memphite theology within the temple's concept.

The overall importance of these special deities at Gerf Hussein, who were newly created during the reign of Ramesses II, is shown by the fact that all three deities at the terminal point of the ritual axis of the temple are deities of Ramesses. On the rear wall of the sanctuary the divine Ramesses as '(Ramesses, beloved of Amun) in the *pr* of Ptah' received a cult between Ptah of Ramesses, Ptah-Tatenen of Ramesses, and Hathor of Ramesses. The *raison d'être* of these special forms of the gods/goddesses was – in my opinion – to express the close relationship between the king and the deity in question. By referring, for example, the god Ptah to Ramesses II, probably the participation of the king within the divine powers of Ptah was expressed.⁸

Conclusions

The temple at Gerf Hussein was erected as the last of the huge Lower Nubian speoi of Ramesses II, most probably late in the fifth decade of his reign. Its theology and cult are closely connected to the earlier rock-cut temples of Ramesses II in Nubia, especially to the great speos at Abu Simbel, to Derr, and Wadi es-Sebua. As in these earlier temples, the gods of the so-called state-triad are seen to dominate the temple concept. By this it can be deduced, first, that the closely connected themes of 'creation' and 'regeneration' were especially important and, second, that stress was laid on displaying the religious and political unity of Egypt, which was symbolized by the state-triad. In each one of the three later speoi one god of the state-triad was singled out as the main deity: Ra at Derr, Amun at Wadi es-Sebua, and Ptah at Gerf Hussein. Thus, with the last temple at Gerf Hussein, the re-structuring of the Northern Nubian ritual landscape was completed by linking it very systematically with Egypt at a religious and ritual level (Ullmann 2013).

Closely related with the state-triad is the cult of the divine king. In each of the four huge Nubian speoi sacred kingship ideology was an intrinsic part of the temple concept, and was expressed within the cult by integrating in various ways the veneration of the divine king, or, more precisely, the divine manifestations of the king. Within the temple at Gerf Hussein the same instruments were used as in the other speoi, but the way in which the divine Ramesses dominated the whole decoration program was unprecedented: we have seen the prominent role of the so-called 'gods/goddesses of Ramesses' and the multiplicity and variety of the divine manifestations of the king along the main ritual axis. However, the most remarkable feature was the predominance of the divine groups. Groups showing the king between deities had also been an essential feature in the earlier speoi, but gradually they became more and more important, as shown by their steady increase and distribution (Ullmann 2011: 308). This development culminated at Gerf Hussein, especially in the main hall of the temple, which was completely dominated by 12 triads altogether. These were

⁷ See the listings of the known designations in Manouvrier 1996: 466–548.

⁸ For a more detailed treatment of the 'gods/goddesses of Ramesses', see Ullmann 2007.

used as an ideal instrument to display visually first the religious concept of the temple, in terms of the deities worshipped, and the relationships between them, and also the integration of the king within the divine cosmos.

It is a great pity indeed that almost nothing of these singular decoration programs has survived.

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