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SHRINE

الناوس

*Neal Spencer*

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## SHRINE

## الناوس

Neal Spencer

Schrein  
Portatif, naos

*Shrines, defined here as the architectural element immediately surrounding a sacred image, usually of a god, are attested throughout Pharaonic history, but with regional and chronological variations very evident. The architectural form of Egyptian shrines was developed from that of archaic "tent-shrines" made of timber and matting, but later examples represent a distillation of formal temple architecture. Eventually, classic shrine-forms were deployed in non-temple contexts.*

يُعرَّف الناوس هنا كعنصر معماري يحيط بتصوير غالباً ما يكون لإله، ويظهر الناوس عبر التاريخ الفرعوني مع وجود إختلافات زمانية ومكانية واضحة. تطور شكل الناوس المصري من شكل الناوس العتيق المسمى بالـ"الناوس الخيمة" المصنوع من الخشب والحصير، ولكن نماذج الناوس اللاحقة تجسد جوهر العمارة الرسمية للمعابد. أخيراً تطور الشكل التقليدي للناوس بسياقات غير سياقات المعبد.

**T**he focal point of most Egyptian formal religious rituals was the divine image, a physical manifestation of one or several deities, typically (but not always) in the form of a statue. Much of religious architecture served to shroud the divine image in nested layers of protection from the chaotic—and hence dangerous—outside world. It is thus unsurprising that a formal code of architectural forms was developed over the millennia to provide this protection. The present discussion addresses stand-alone shrines, whether portable or not, rather than integrated components of temple architecture such as temple sanctuaries. Evidently, this division is a modern distinction and there was much overlap between these spheres, both in terms of function and form.

### Early Shrines

The earliest iconographic representations of architectural settings for deities and royal



Figure 1. Depiction of a shrine: detail from the mudstone "Hunters Palette." Naqada III. British Museum, EA 20790.

display are on late Predynastic and Early Dynastic seals, maceheads, palettes, and decorated ceramics (fig. 1), and in the small

models found buried in deposits in and around early temples (Kemp 2006: 142 - 150). The seals and maceheads show figures within, and processions leading towards, stylized structures, seemingly built from a combination of reeds, matting, wood, and perhaps textiles. Some depictions may represent portable shrines. The forms of some of these shrines had been codified by the early 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty, when they were replicated in stone within the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara (fig. 2). Reliefs from Old Kingdom pyramid-temples label these architectural forms as the *pr-nw* and *pr-wr* shrines, associated with the North and South, respectively. Many of the distinctive elements of these shrines can be found in later temple and funerary architecture, particularly the corner pillars and vaulted roof of the *pr-nw*, or the curved roof of the *pr-wr*. However, the classic form of shrine, known from the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty onwards but attested in hieroglyphic and representational evidence in the Old Kingdom, is that combining torus-molding, cavetto cornice, and a flat roof, as embodied by the hieroglyphic determinative for *zh-ntr*. Other elements were combined with this form, particularly pyramidal roofs, plinths, and decorative details such as *kbeker*-friezes, uraeus-friezes, and winged sun-discs. Some shrines' ceilings were decorated with rows of vultures. Many of these "classic" shrines thus represent a distillation of formal Egyptian sacred architecture—they are effectively temples in miniature. Much of the architectural language used in shrines thus evoked imagery relating to solar religion and cosmic rebirth. These same themes are prevalent in the daily temple rituals focused around shrines.

Of course, the use of stone and metal, or solid wood construction, allowed embellishment with developed decorative schemes not possible on the archaic shrines. As early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty, a Heliopolitan shrine or chapel of Djoser bore finely carved scenes featuring divinities (Donadoni Roveri 1989: 200), but perhaps more typical is the decoration on a granite naos of Pepy I found at Elephantine. Here, the rather stark



Figure 2. Limestone dummy-building, replicating the form of archaic tent-shrines made of timber and matting. Step Pyramid complex, Saqqara, 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty.

architectural form was only embellished with the royal titulary and epithets (Ricke 1960: 54, n. 18, fig. 15).

By the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, the classic forms of shrines were already a widely accepted part of formal religious imagery. Surviving royal examples are rare, but include the naos of Senusret I found at Karnak, decorated with offering scenes (Pillet 1923), and the wooden shrine found at Dahshur, which housed the *ka*-statue of pharaoh Hor of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (de Morgan 1895: 91 - 93, figs. 213 - 216). From the Middle Kingdom onwards, the same architectural forms were being employed for shrines housing private statues, some originally set up along the processional routes at sites such as Abydos (e.g., Roeder 1914: 122 - 133, pls. 40 - 43).

#### *Shrines of the New Kingdom and Later*

Abundant representational evidence survives in New Kingdom temples. The reliefs in the temple of Sety I at Abydos show a range of types, including complex groups of nested



Figure 3. Detail of decoration, showing register of divine figures, from a monolithic red granite naos of pharaoh Nakhthorheb from Bubastis, 30<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. British Museum, EA 1078.

shrines (Gardiner 1938: pls. 10, 13, 14, 16, 33, 41). Unusual shrines were also produced, such as the low chapels for statues set up by Ramesses II at Per-Ramesses (Myśliwiec 1978; Saleh and Sourouzian 1987: 204 - 205). Finally, the distinctive chapels for processional barks, open at either end (effectively transitory shrines), were densely decorated with ritual and processional scenes (e.g., Arnaudès-Montélimard 2003; Burgos et al. 2006). Wood and matting shelters, and perhaps textile veils stretched onto wooden frames, were another form of sacred protection, now known only from the holes drilled around certain reliefs of deities (Brand 2007: 61 - 64).

A large number of monolithic shrines, typically in hard stones such as granite, have survived from the Late Period, but it is one iconographic scheme, seemingly developed in the cult centers of the Delta, that signals a shift in function for these monuments, complementary to the core function of housing the divine image (Spencer 2006; fig.

3). This complex iconography featured registers of divine images, which embodied cosmogonical narratives particular to certain temples and must have been seen as supporting the eternal cycle of re-creation. Other monolithic shrines of the Late Period bore complex mythological narratives, representations of divine imagery from within the temple, or even astronomical information. The scale of these shrines is rather imposing: some are over 3 m in height, and at Mendes reaching 7 m, emphasizing their protective function. The term *k3r* is used to refer to shrines of this form. In some cases, the proportions of the shrine strongly suggest that the images housed within featured more than one deity (Boeser 1915: 1, pls. 1 - 5).

At Bubastis, at least twelve monolithic naoi were commissioned in the reign of pharaoh Nakhthorheb alone (Spencer 2006: 39 - 46); alas, the destruction of the building has deprived us of a clear sense of their original layout. It has been suggested that one of these shrines may have been associated with coronation rituals (Rosenow 2008). In contrast, the shrines at Mendes were provided with minimal decor yet stood facing each other in an open-air court; these truly afforded the god protection from the Delta climate (fig. 4; Hansen 1967: 7 - 9, pls. 3, 6 - 8). Monolithic naoi continued to be produced throughout the Ptolemaic and Roman eras (e.g., Rondot 1990; Thiers 1997). The podium at Elephantine supported three naoi housing stelae (Kaiser et al. 1976: 88 - 92, figs. 2 and 3). The distinctive characteristics of Pharaonic shrine architecture were also present in Meroitic temples (fig. 5).

### *Materials and Ritual*

Building inscriptions indicate that the shrines were typically sealed with wooden doors, embellished with metal or other lavish materials. The Ritual of Mut describes the priest unbolting these doors for the morning service (Moret 1902: 31 - 48); depictions of a similar ritual survive in the temple of Sety I at Abydos (Gardiner 1935: pls. 3, 4, 13, 14, 21 - 23). We need to accept that many cult statues



Figure 4. One of the four monolithic naoi set up in the sanctuary of the temple at Mendes, inscribed for Amasis, 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty.



Figure 5. Fragment from a small copper-alloy shrine found at Kawa, Meroitic Period. British Museum EA 63586.

would have been stored within shrines in a disassembled state, as some were too tall for their own shrine (e.g., Chassinat and Daumas: *Dendara II*: 56). In Papyrus Harris I, a shrine set up at Memphis is described as containing statues of Ptah, Sakhmet, and Nefertum, flanked by “statues-of-the-lord” (kings in ritual poses?) making offerings (Grandet 1994:



Figure 6. Wooden door of a shrine, inlaid with polychrome glass. The scene depicts Darius I before Anubis and Isis. Provenance unknown. 27<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. British Museum EA 37946.

287). Furthermore, that the doors of many naoi opened inwards makes it clear that the divine image would have been housed towards the rear, often in a smaller internal niche. Other shrines, even within large formal temples, would have been made of wood, sometimes elaborately painted or inlaid with glass and precious metals; some were then covered in sheet metal (fig. 6; and see, for example, Hope 1998: 829 - 837; Yoyotte 1972: pl. 19) or provided with elaborate openwork wooden or faience sides (as depicted in a papyrus in Turin: Donadoni Roveri 1989: 90). The caches from the Sacred Animal Necropolis temples at North Saqqara provide a glimpse of the range of sizes and qualities that would have existed (Insley Green 1987). Many of these shrines were destined to house copper alloy statues, dedicated by individuals, rather than principal cult images.

Some shrines were evidently intended to be portable, most notably for use in processional temple festivals. The extensive representational evidence relating to Theban festivals includes depictions of the large sacred bark of Amun, which supported a



Figure 7. Naophorous statue featuring an archaic shrine-form combined with pyramidal roof; held by Overseer of Priests Wahibra. Sais, 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Egyptian Museum, Cairo, CG 672.

shrine (or even nested shrines) on its deck, also festooned with dozens of figures of officiants, royalty, and even deities in ritual poses. In some depictions the shrine seems to be quite exposed, with only a textile veil occasionally depicted to shroud the divine image (also at Abydos: Gardiner 1935: pl. 5). Of course, shrines for royal display are well attested for royal festivals such as the *Heb-Sed*, with representations of architectural forms similar to those attested for the shrines of deities.

The architectural language of shrines also appears in other aspects of Egyptian material culture. In addition to the integration of shrine representations in naophorous statuary (fig. 7), objects from the funerary sphere echoed the form—notably some coffins and sarcophagi, shabti boxes, canopic chests, and animal coffins. Pectorals and sistra of the Late Period could also incorporate shrine forms (fig. 8). Miniature shrines, in stone, copper



Figure 8. Faience sistrum in the form of Hathor-head, topped with shrine façade featuring cavetto cornice, torus moulding, and battered walls. 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Said to be from Bubastis. British Museum EA 38173.



Figure 9. Miniature copper-alloy model of shrine with figure of Amun-Ra, inscribed for King Djehutyemhat. Late Third Intermediate Period. British Museum EA 11015.

alloy, and other materials, faithfully represent the key architectural components of the classic shrines. Those with suspension loops must have been attached to walls in temples or houses, as they are too heavy to wear about the neck (fig. 9).

The smallest shrines could evidently be the product of a single artisan, but in the case of the larger decorated naoi, a skilled team of craftsmen would have been required. The

quarrying of the stone and initial sculpting into a recognizable shrine-form prior to transport are attested at a quarry in the Eastern Desert (Harrell 2002). Proportional drawings for naoi have survived, particularly for wooden shrines (Donadoni Roveri 1989: 90; Tait 2004). In many cases, the final decoration must have been completed in the dark interior of the temple sanctuaries in which the naoi were set up.

### *Bibliographic Notes*

An in-depth study of shrine function, architecture, iconography, and lexicography, has yet to be undertaken; the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* covers certain aspects (e.g., vol. IV: columns 341 – 342, 932 – 936; vol. V: columns 709 - 712). The Egyptologist thus relies on published photographs of individual monuments housed in museums or discovered in excavations; rarely do these publications feature accurate architectural drawings. The most comprehensive museum collection is in Cairo (Roeder 1914). Elephantine is unusual in the preservation of three contemporary naoi in one temple, found almost in situ (Niederberger 1999: 86 - 91). For a discussion of the distinctive Late Period naoi, see Spencer (2006); Thiers provides a list of royal monolithic naoi across all periods (1997: 259 - 265).

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