

# EDFU & KOM OMBO TEMPLES

## NUBIT ORACLE & MEDICAL CENTRE

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We are now travelling upstream on the Nile from Luxor southwards on a typical tourist cruise ship enjoying the peaceful views from the ships roof terrace of very green fertile fields on both sides of the river.

From time to time we hear pumps sucking water via huge pipes from the Nile to irrigate the desert fields, which stretch up to a kilometre towards the arid desert hills on the left and right of the river.

You have to imagine that this picture is the same for over 1,000km from Aswan to Cairo, only interrupted by towns which regularly line the Nile river banks. One of these towns is Edfu, approximately 100km south of Luxor, which was in antiquity called *Tbot*. It was the capital of the second province in Upper Egypt and at the time an important and rich city.

### The Temple of Horus

This significant temple at Edfu was the home of falcon headed god Horus and for a long time

was half covered under Nile mud and silt sand piled up over more than 1,000 years by the annual river flooding.

Because of this, the main temple buildings are well preserved with 70% of the temple structures still in situ today, so it is one of the few undisturbed examples of Egyptian temple architecture and relief art. The Horus Temple is one of the younger buildings in Egyptian history and was started under Pharaoh Ptolemy III in 237BC with many refinements and extensions built over 180 years until the rule of Ptolemy XII in 57BC.

The builders used the typical Egyptian temple lay out with many halls lined up one after the other with a total length of 137m, each getting progressively smaller with reducing width and lower ceilings, as well as darker towards the sanctuary.

The massive pylon entrance gate measures 64m in width and 36m in height equal to a 12 storey building and is the biggest

pylon structure after the Karnak temple in Luxor. This pylon was flanked on both sides by two falcon statues and a central terrace over the entrance served for the annual ritual purposes when priests presented their best bread falcons to the public. *Tbot* was the most famous falcon breeding station in Egypt at the time.

After passing through the first pylon gate you enter a colonnaded court yard with 32 high papyrus bundle type columns and another falcon statue, which today serves as a sought after tourist photo stop picturing the falcon statue together with your loved ones.

The following section consists of a propylon with 12 columns and flower capitals. Here the ancient library was situated on the left side plus a consecration room on the right, a feature found also in some other Egyptian temples.

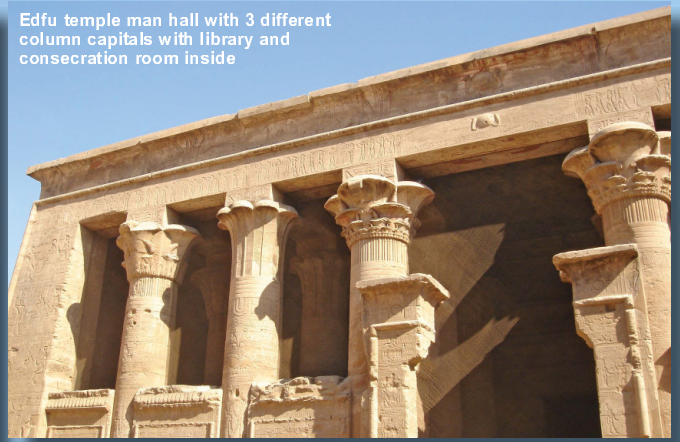
The hall thereafter is supported again by 12 columns and has 3 side chambers consisting of a treasury room with names of mining areas in the Egyptian

Edfu temple pylon gate second biggest with 36 meter, four spaces for flag poles, the flying of colored flags demonstrate the presence of gods





Close up Edfu pylon gate with central balcony from which Horus falcons which were breed at the temple where let flying once a year



Edfu temple main hall with 3 different column capitals with library and consecration room inside

empire displayed on its walls, the Nile room, with various relief scenes depicting the enormous wealth of the country at the time, and the laboratory room with recipes for the production of perfumes and medical ointments.

Two staircases lead to some underground chambers. Another staircase leads to the roof area, which was reserved for priests to perform special rituals. The sanctuary area was surrounded by many storage chambers and the typical corridor running on the left, right and back side of the sanctuary.

A central granite shrine for the main deity statue surprisingly was found to be usurped and previously belonged to an older

temple of Pharaoh Nektanebos II of the 30th dynasty who ruled from 360-342BC.

Priests at the Horus Temple had to perform 3 daily rituals. In the morning priests offered food to Horus in the sanctuary and thereafter closed the door of sanctuary with the Horus shrine for the rest of the day.

At midday the priests were praying and used incense in front of the closed sanctuary door.

The evening ritual again involved the priests praying and offering incense in front of the closed sanctuary door.

In addition this temple complex housed a small Min chapel. Min was the god of fertility and harvest, always depicted with black skin and with an erected phallus in his left hand and raised right hand.

Another building in the temple precinct was the birth room or *mammisi* dedicated to the young god Harsomptus, son of Horus.

#### God Horus

Like all other main deities in Egypt, Horus had many roles and was the god of heaven and kings, and the god of the living beings and fertile land, the latter role he shared with Min. He was always depicted as falcon headed human figure, or as falcon with spread



Part of the perimeter wall of the Edfu temple *mammisi* or birth house so-called because of scenes showing the divine inception and birth of the pharaoh

wings.

Another portrayal of Horus was as falcon with a winged sun disc and red and white double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt. This was a reference that he was one of the few gods worshipped in the whole country and not just regionally like many other gods.

Horus served as main god of the Upper Egypt provinces of *Wejset-Hor*, *Ta-Seti* and *Nechen*, as well as of the Lower Egypt provinces of *Chepesch*, *Kem-wer* and *Behedet*. Horus was the son of goddess Hathor and later of Isis and god Osiris, to whom he became successor and guardian of the underworld.

As mentioned earlier, his main temple was situated at Edfu with other temples dedicated to him being built at Kom Ombo, Letopolis, Buto, Behedet and Hierakonpolis, where his sun god role was merged with Re-Harachte. Horus was one of the earliest gods worshipped since the Pre-Dynastic period 5,000 years ago.

His eyes symbolized the sun and moon, and as god of the two horizons he therefore represented the sun rise and sun set. In his role as protector of the ruling king, each pharaoh in turn represented Horus on earth, therefore the Egyptian throne was

called Horus throne.

In addition Horus also represented the order on earth, and was always fighting with his brother god Seth, known as a powerful evil god of wild nature, desert, storms and weather.

After rivalries with his brother Seth, Horus became god of Lower Egypt and Seth god of Upper Egypt, so together with Seth he presented the king at his crowing ceremony with the double crown symbolizing the unification of Lower and Upper Egypt.

Horus and Seth were also often shown together on relief scenes in a typical depiction binding knots to represent the important unification of Upper and Lower Egypt. This scene is carved into the colossal Ramses II statue at Luxor as well as at Abu Simbel.

Horus was also represented by a long list of sub-gods carrying various names such as Horus on his papyrus plant, Horus of the horizon, Horus with the strong arm (a link to god Month), Horus in the horizon as *Hor-em-achet* or *Harmachis* in the role of sun god shown as falcon or lion, Horus the child, Horus the elder as *Harwer* or *Haroeris*, Horus who guards both lands as *Panebtawi*, Horus the

Horus the unifier as *Hor-mau* or *Harsomptus*, Horus son of Isis, Horus the bull of heaven, Horus hidden behind papyrus. In all these roles he had different divine attributes, responsibilities and powers.

### Kom Ombo Double Temple

The unique double temple at Kom Ombo is one of my favourites despite the fact that 70% of it is destroyed and the temple is rather small. But the interesting relief scenes impressed me most, especially with regards to the details of the high level of Egyptian medical knowledge at the time, which I could study there.

Kom Ombo is situated 50km north of Aswan and was called *Nubit* in antiquity, meaning the golden city. Different to the Esna and Edfu temples, Kom Ombo is situated outside the ancient town. Similar to Edfu, it also belongs to the last temples built during the last Egyptian dynasty under Greek Ptolemy rule.

Building started by Pharaoh Ptolemy VI after 180BC and finished by Ptolemy XII before 50BC. The structure we see today was built on a 1,500 years older temple from the 18th dynasty in the New Kingdom period.

Kom Ombo is a unique double



Kom Ombo temple main hall with perimeter wall in front, pylon gate not in situ any longer



temple dedicated to falcon god Horus and crocodile god Sobek. It is the only structure in ancient Egypt with 2 identical temples being built as one structure. The temples are partitioned along the middle axis into a left temple area for Sobek and right temple area for Horus. Therefore all pylons, halls and chambers have 2 entrances and 2 axis corridors with no separation wall.

The first pylon is not in situ any longer, so we enter straight into the first fore court with a central altar and 2 wash basins. The few columns left standing here shown detailed relief scenes all round, with rests of colouring, giving us a glimpse of the rich colouring with which the ancient temples were totally covered.

With a few steps we reach the first hall with 10 papyrus bundle columns and the 2 earlier explained mentioned entrances. The following second hall has again 10 papyrus bundle columns and 2 entrances, plus 2 staircases leading to the roof which is no longer in place. In antiquity only priests and the pharaoh were allowed to enter the roof area, where annual sun unification rituals were performed linked to the all important sun gods. These rituals can also be seen on some of the relief scenes on the temple walls.

#### The Oracle

Moving on again, 2 entrances are leading into 3 further halls and finally to the 2 sanctuaries next to each other, which now are

separated by a wall.

Kom Ombo was also used as an important place for oracles. At a closer look one can make a little surprise discovery. How did the oracle work and were the gods really giving answers?

The separating wall of the 2 sanctuaries was actually a double wall and had just enough space for one person or priest to hide. This priest entered the tiny space via an underground passage from the back of the temple. He used a small wall opening to both sanctuaries to give suggestive answers to the divine advice seeking pharaohs. Were the pharaohs always told what they wanted to hear? Or was this oracle used by priests to influence politics?



Kom Ombo relief scene with crocodile headed god Sobek, crocodile were breed at the temple in his honor



Kom Ombo temple relief with offering scene and rich givings

The Kom Ombo temple layout also included the typical 2 surrounding corridors on 3 sides, with the inner corridor having many storage chambers at the back wall.

The whole temple precinct was surrounded by a strong and high mud brick wall. Within its perimeter 2 chapels were included for crocodile headed god Sobek and mother goddess Hathor. It is interesting to note that various mummified crocodiles were found on site, some even buried in long sarcophagi. This suggests that possibly crocodiles were bred and kept by priests at the temple.

The small complex also includes a nilometer as water source and water level measurement plus a birth house *mammisi*. Kom Ombo is an interesting information source with numerous relief scenes depicting many religious rules, order of rituals and events, timing of ceremonies and the cities where all festivities took place. But most important are the relief carvings showing many medical instruments and the first Egyptian calendar.

### The First Egyptian Calendar

The first calendar was started by king Aha in the first dynasty around 5,000 years ago. He used the rise of the dog star Sirius or *sepdet* as base of his calendar, which reappeared on 19 June around the time when the Nile inundations normally started. The rise of the flood waters marked the start of the New Year.

Later Julius Caesar and Pope Gregor XIII made slight modification to the Egyptian calendar around 1,500AD, which today is the base of the Gregorian calendar in use worldwide, except of certain Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia.

The ancient Egyptian calendar only had 3 seasons, inundation or *akhet* from July to October, planting or *peret* from November to February and harvest or *shemu* from March to June.

Each season was divided into 4 month plus 5 additional days to come to 365 days for the year and each month was separated in 3 weeks of 10 days. During the floods all farm work stopped, providing the state with all manpower needed for huge

again. The Egyptian calendar was linked to many deities and possibly was seen as too holy to be changed. The mentioned 5 extra days were holy holidays dedicated to the gods Osiris, Horus, Seth, Isis and Nephthys.

As each month consisted of 3 weeks, one day per week was a working holiday and in the Egyptian calendar this fell on the 10th, 20th and 30th day of each month. During the New Kingdom period Ramses II even introduced a second free day per week, as the strength of the economy at the time allowed him to do this.

During the Middle Kingdom around 2,000BC the calendar was changed in naming the year of the reign of the king. So the reference used was "year 5 reign of king *user-maat-Re* (the Horus name of Pharaoh Ramses II), second month of *peret* (planting season), day 10".

At the Kom Ombo Temple inside a chamber of the Horus section one can see the first calendar in Egyptian history – please refer to the picture on the left.

Egyptians had a good knowledge of mathematics, they did use a decimal system, which also was the basis of their calendar. But they did not know the concept of zero. They could already multiply and divide, and allocated the number nine a special role.

Ancient Egyptians were experienced astronomers and were recording many cosmic movements. They knew already various planets such as Venus, Mars, Saturn, Jupiter and Mercury, plus various stars such as Orion, Big Bear, Lion and Dragon. Up to the New Kingdom period they extended their cosmic knowledge to include the 36 Dekan star groups and the Halley comet.

### Well Developed Medical Knowledge

Egyptian priests developed a surprisingly detailed knowledge of anatomy, physiology and medicine, which was documented in ancient texts found and used by doctors for over 3,000 years and were the basis for the famous



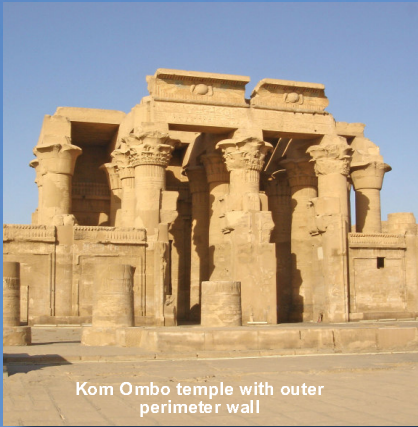
Famous Kom Ombo relief with first in history documented medical instruments



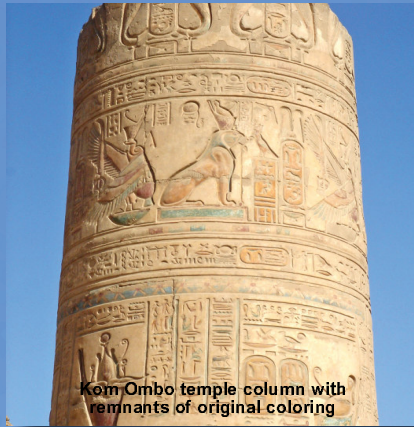
Famous Kom Ombo relief with first calendar in history

building projects of temples and palaces.

The quarter day difference to the cosmic year led to an increasing variance over 1,460 years, at which point the calendars matched



Kom Ombo temple with outer perimeter wall



Kom Ombo temple column with remnants of original coloring



Kom Ombo temple main hall with remains of small Hathor chapel on the left

### Greek Hippocrates texts.

For example 13 papyri with 110 columns contained precise medical texts and were dated 1,800BC. In addition books with specific medical topics were discovered, as well as texts dating back 4,500 years. These list 48 injuries including broken bones, dislocations, luxations, ulcers plus their treatment.

In summary over 900 different diagnoses were known at the time including lung and digestion system deceases, urinary passage problems, bilharzias and various forms of headache.

Surgical procedures for severe cases were already common, such as needling of wounds done with the many medical instruments found and depicted on wall reliefs.

Egyptian doctors recognized the heart called *ib* or *hati* as central body organ, but linked it with the stomach. In antiquity Egyptian doctors were already specialized in eyes, head, teeth, stomach, orthopaedic surgery and even gynaecology.

But there were also certain blank areas in the ancient Egyptian medical knowledge, such as the importance of blood circulation.

Therefore they did not know the difference between arteries and veins, or the difference between windpipe and gullet, in addition they believed that the pulse was produced by breathing. This may result from the fact that pathology research was not done based on religious grounds, as embalming was regarded as unclean and therefore not used for improving anatomy and medical knowledge.

Priests were the guardians of medical know how and via chemical processes practiced in temple labs developed a good insight into chemistry including certain distillery processes for medicines.

### Long List of Medicines

Many medicines based on herbal, animal and mineral extracts including oils, ointments and powders were created and in use in ancient Egypt. Over 160 herbs were used and certain medicines with up to 37 components were produced and are documented with all their ingredients. This included a very effective medicine for tapeworms, a common decease at the time.

In addition doctors prescribed medicines against body odors,

which included ostrich egg, tortoise shell and gallnut tamarisk, which was rubbed on. For tongue illness for example the used ingredients were bran, milk, goose grease and were prescribed to be rinsed inside the mouth.

Very interesting is also the long list of illnesses found in mummies by today's researchers using latest medical technology including scanners. This list includes for example polio, arthritis, scoliosis, arteriosclerosis and spondylarthrosis (both found in the mummy of Ramses II who reached the ripe old age of 92), cholesterol problems, pleurisy, other lung problems (from inhaling carbon dust from open fires by cooking inside huts), many parasites and worms, bilharzias, tuberculosis, malaria, buck teeth (genetically), rotting tooth leading to abscesses, tooth fillings and dental bridges with gold wire were also found in Egyptian mummies.

Average life expectancy was low at 40 years. Even the privileged life style of pharaohs did not prevent them from dying early, as they had the same average life expectancy then common people in Egypt.



Kom Ombo temple with outer perimeter wall