

# EGYPT'S NEW KINGDOM & THE LUXOR TEMPLE

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**In a previous article you were informed about the first genius pyramid buildings by Egyptian kings from the 3rd to 6th dynasty, which represent the Old Kingdom Period.**

In this article, we are going fast forward by 1,000 years to the New Kingdom Period, which lasted for 480 years from 1550-1070BC and we will take a closer look at the 40 pharaohs of the 18-20th dynasty.

These important Egyptian god-like rulers resided first at Thebes and for a short period built a new capital at Amarna further north on the banks of the Nile, moving thereafter back to Memphis south of Cairo. At the end of the 20th dynasty, they settled at Tanis in the Nile delta. But the area around Luxor, Karnak and Thebes was the main cult area throughout the New

Kingdom period with major temple complexes being used on both sides of the Nile and the famous royal tomb area with the Valley of Kings or *bidan el-moluk* and Valley of Queens or *bidan el-harim*.

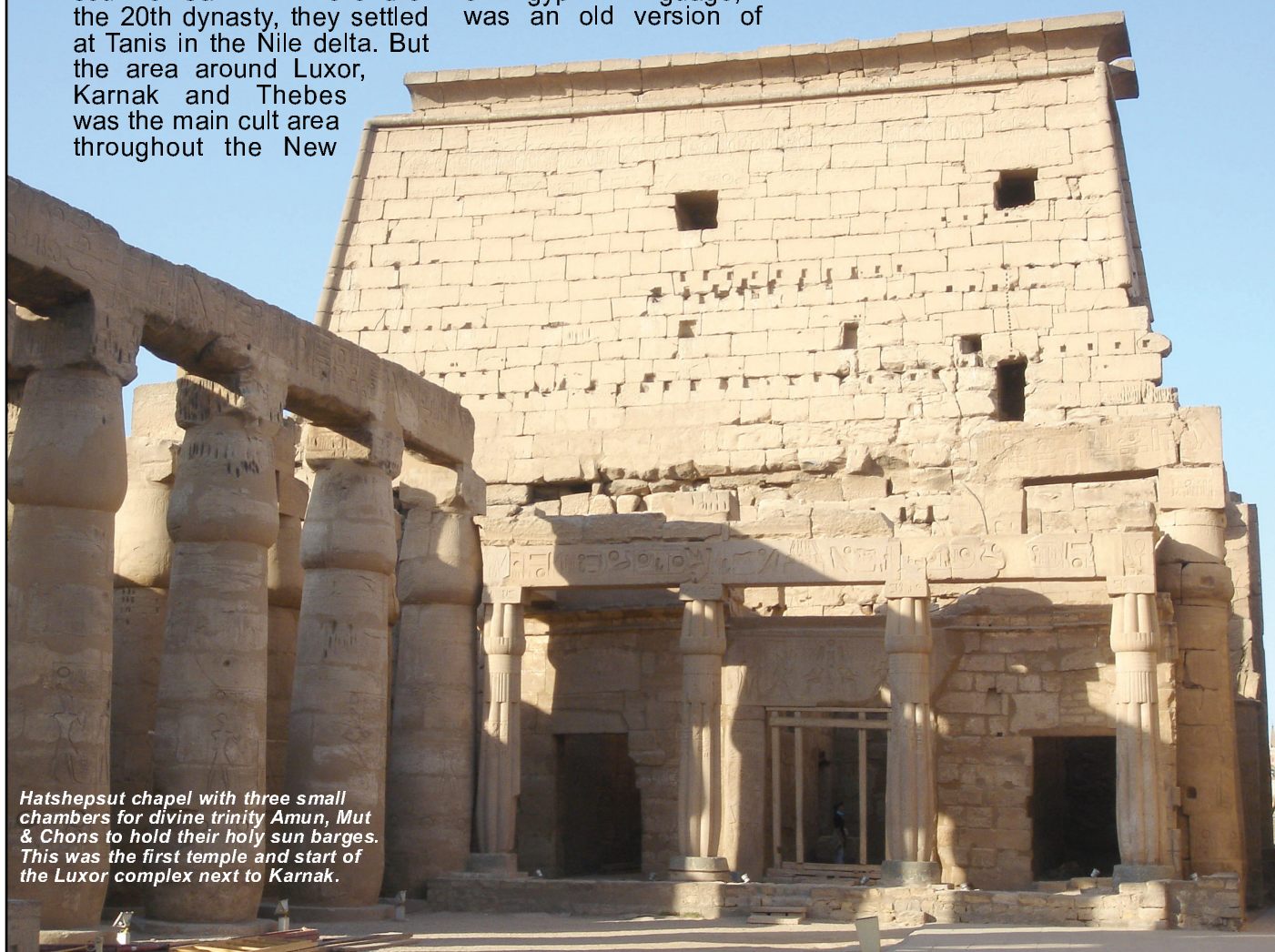
This article will focus on the most interesting temple complex of Luxor built by pharaoh Amenhotep III also known by his Greek name Amenophis, and the legendary Ramses II who also created the two famous grotto temples at Abu Simbel. During the New Kingdom period over one million people lived in the Luxor area and it is no surprise when ancient records mention, that the city had over 100 gates. In antiquity Luxor was called *weset* or *ipet-resit* in the old Egyptian language, which was an old version of

Coptic language and is still used today in religious rituals by few Coptic priests.

## Luxor Temple Complex

The Luxor temple complex was built right on the river banks of the Nile for the three main gods Amun, his wife Mut and their son Chons, forming the leading trinity of gods in Luxor for a long time. Amun was regarded as the king of gods with multiple identities making him a universal god and creator of Egypt with the capacities to renew and resurrect, therefore also regarded as the sun and fertility god depicted by the holy animals ram and goose.

Mut was the daughter of sun god Re and seen by old Egyptians as the mother



Hatshepsut chapel with three small chambers for divine trinity Amun, Mut & Chons to hold their holy sun barges. This was the first temple and start of the Luxor complex next to Karnak.



Corner view of double colonnaded courtyard built by Ramses II with 74 lotus bundle style columns supporting the missing roof with 7m high statues of the pharaoh.



Second ceremonial tenemos measuring 52m by 46m surrounded by double row of papyrus bundle shaped colonnades with open inner area built by Amenhotep III.

goddess ruling the heavenly sky and was depicted on wall reliefs with the red and white double crown of Lower and Upper Egypt *shenti* and represented by the two holy animals vulture and lion.

Their son Chons was seen as young moon god with healing capacities and responsible as guardian over life. He also acted as god of oracle giving advice and was depicted with a human head as child with a single long lock of hair on one side, the typical old Egyptian way to depict children, or with falcon head and black moon disk to distinguish him from legendary falcon god Horus.

A total of 14 different halls and court yards make up the temple complex of Luxor giving the walled central part a total length of 230m. It was also extended with further internal buildings by three other pharaohs, Tuthmosis III, the famed female pharaoh Hatshepsut, and Tutankhamun well-known through his richly furnished tomb, one of the few

tombs which were not robbed already in antiquity, like most other tombs. Luxor and the four times bigger temple complex of Karnak were linked by a 5km long sphinx alley, of which 500m are still in situ today.

The Karnak temple complex is described in another article. The Egyptian temple architecture and lay out did not change over thousands of years. High mud brick walls surrounded the temple to protect them from public view, as only the royal family, the extensive royal court and senior state employees and priests were allowed inside. The population followed their own rituals in front of the temple during official festivities inside.

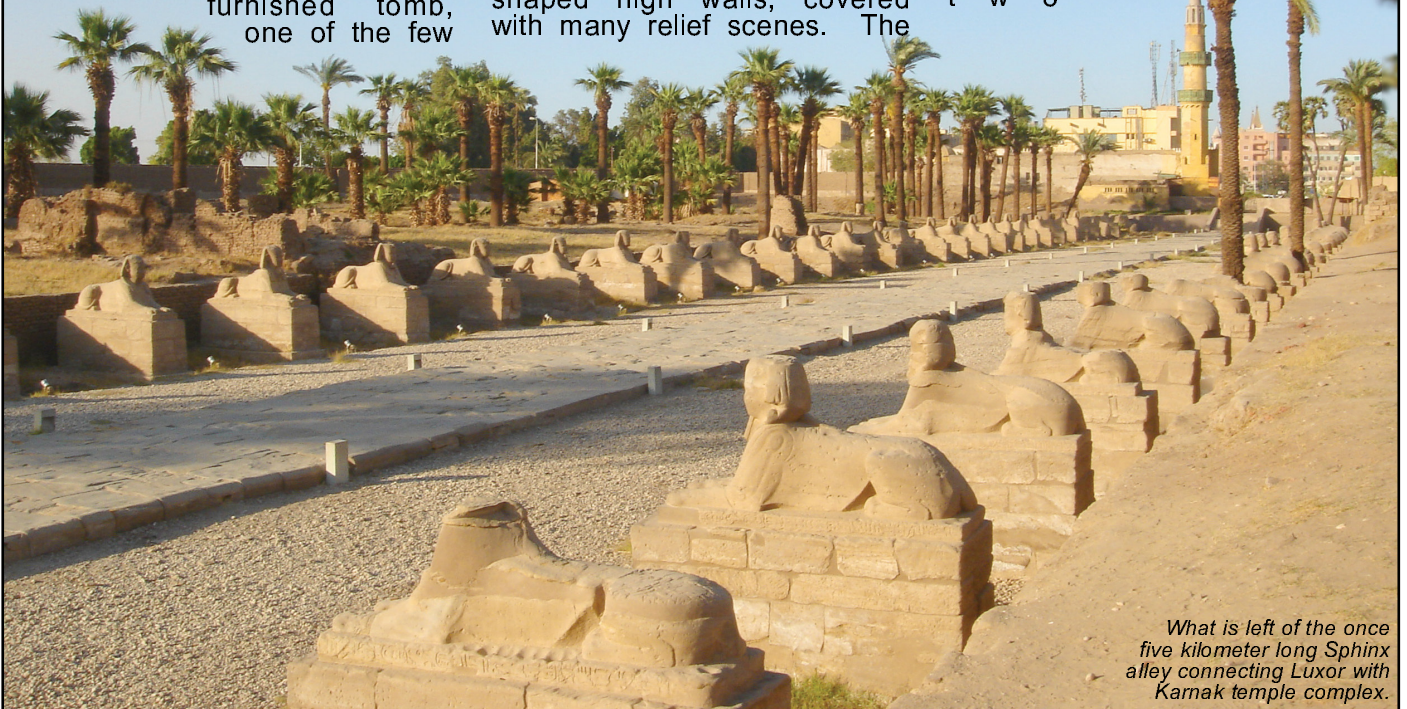
### Pylon – A Monumental Gate

The highest structure in ancient Egyptian temples always was the pylon, a most impressive monumental temple entrance consisting of two rectangular wide towers, better described as thick trapeze shaped high walls, covered with many relief scenes. The

Luxor pylon was already striking with a 63m width and 30m plus height, although this was not the biggest pylon in Old Egypt.

Some pylon structures were up to 120m wide and over 40m high with a wall thickness of 15m. Normally a staircase was leading to the top for certain ceremonial rituals.

The pylons were seen as representing the mountains on the horizon and marking the site of the ritually important sun rise. On each side of the pylon's tall double winged wooden metal amour plated gate entrance two niches were holding high flagpoles, which oversaw the pylon and were decorated at the top end by colored bands flying in the wind in honor of the gods. In addition pharaohs honored gods by posting t w o



What is left of the once five kilometer long Sphinx alley connecting Luxor with Karnak temple complex.



Sphinx alley connecting Karnak with Luxor. The alley once was five kilometers long. Main pylon, obelisk and three of the previously Ramses statues in the back ground.



South view with main pylon and obelisk built by Ramses II and Abu Al Haggag mosque built into the temple at a later stage.

obelisks in front of the pylons, as well as having monumental statues of themselves erected on each side to demonstrate their ruling status to remind onlookers who created and was master of the temple.

The relief scenes depicted on the Luxor pylon were typical at the time, showing war scenes from the famous battle at Kadesh against Hitite King Muwatallis in Syria with Ramses II beating enemies to demonstrate his superiority. These relief scenes were normally cut deep into the stone blocks so with the shadows from sun light they could be seen from far.

Other scenes show Ramses speaking to his generals, the Egyptian troop and camp being attacked, the pharaoh on his horse drawn chariot shooting arrows at the enemies and the Hitite enemies defeated and fleeing. It is interesting that other historic sources did not report the Kadesh

battle to be a glorious win for Ramses, but that he was defeated and negotiated a peace treaty.

This included some serious marriage diplomacy with the result that he took a 7th and 8th wife, being both Hitite princesses, of which only one is known to us today - Princess Sauskanu, the daughter of King Hattusilis. With her marriage she was given her new Egyptian name, Maat-hor-neferu-Re and the use of the old Egyptian word *maat* meaning balance and order being proof of the new peace treaty.

### Temple Lay-out & Architecture

But let's take a step back in time. It was common practice by pharaohs to extend existing temples of their predecessors, or even building bigger and more lavish temples on ancient sites, using the old hewn stone blocks as building material. In rare cases even statues and shrines were usurped and re-used in new temples. If we look at the

Luxor temple view from the Nile with typical sailing boats still used today for all kinds of short and long haul transport right down to Cairo.



### Tips for Visitors to Luxor

- Avoid European holiday season, if you are used to heat you could go in low summer season;
- Plan a minimum of 3 days as you have to see Luxor, Karnak and the tombs & temples at West Thebes;
- It is advisable to book your own private guide, as this allows you to avoid the masses;
- Go to Luxor & Karnak temples twice, once in the morning & afternoon – different light conditions;
- Get up early and do the hot air balloon flight over West Thebes temples – best Nile views;
- Be at the Valley of Kings at opening time as you do not need to stand in line;
- If you like tombs and their colorful painted walls visit besides Valley of Kings & Valley of Queens the workers tombs at Deir al Medinah and nobel tombs at Sheikh Abd el Qurna;
- Highly recommended temple visits: Hatshepsut, Medinet Habu, Ramesseum – in that order;
- Most recommended is also a Nile cruise to Aswan and flight to Abu Simbel – not the bus tour;
- On the Nile cruise stop and visit temples at Esna, Edfu and Kom Ombo;
- In Aswan, visit temples on Elephantine, Philea and Kalabsha islands close by;
- If you are crazy about river cruises, add the Nasser lake cruise to Abu Simbel plus other temples;
- The Luxor and Nile cruises can be done in one week, plus the Nasser cruise in 10 days together.

Luxor temple today, it is actually the small three chambered shrine, which was first built by Hatshepsut, to house the holy wooden barges used for processions of the Amun and other god statues.

Approximately 90 years and four crowned pharaohs later Amenhotep III started to build the core of the main temple of Luxor consisting of a sanctuary with a small door leading into a fore hall, followed by a fore court with 4 rows of 8 massive columns all covered with previously colored relief scenes.

A huge royal central court yard fully surrounded by double columned galleries measuring 52x46m was built in front. These impressive papyrus shaped columns, all of which have been re-erected, are approximately 10m high and this court yard was entered through another massive pylon, which is not in place any longer.

But Amenhotep built another 52m long entrance hall in front of it, with a double row of monumental papyrus columns reaching 16m into the sky. Just imagine this is equal to the height of a five storey building, an immense building effort at the time without having the use of cranes or any other hoisting equipment.

### Ramses II - "The Pharaoh"

Ramses II is regarded as "the pharaoh" and was the

most active builder in ancient Egypt. But one has to take his 66 year long reign into account, which was much longer than the average reign of 12 years of the 41 pharaohs of the New Kingdom period.

He died at the age of 92, which is also unusual, as the average life expectancy at the time was just 48. Nobody knows if Ramses actually had more than eight queens, as recorded in ancient texts, who gave him over 100 sons and daughters, and for the first time this included foreign princesses from Babylon, Syria, Mittani and Hitite.

Previously the royal heritage was kept closely in the family and therefore pharaohs often married their sisters, daughters and even mothers. But it is not certain if all these marriages were really consummated. For example the eldest daughter became queen to support the pharaoh for certain rituals to demonstrate female youthfulness and fertility on behalf of her aging mother.

In addition a new position of female high priest was created for the eldest daughter, called God's wife of Amun, which did not allow her to marry. This post included a royal grant of productive farm land, which secured important life long income.

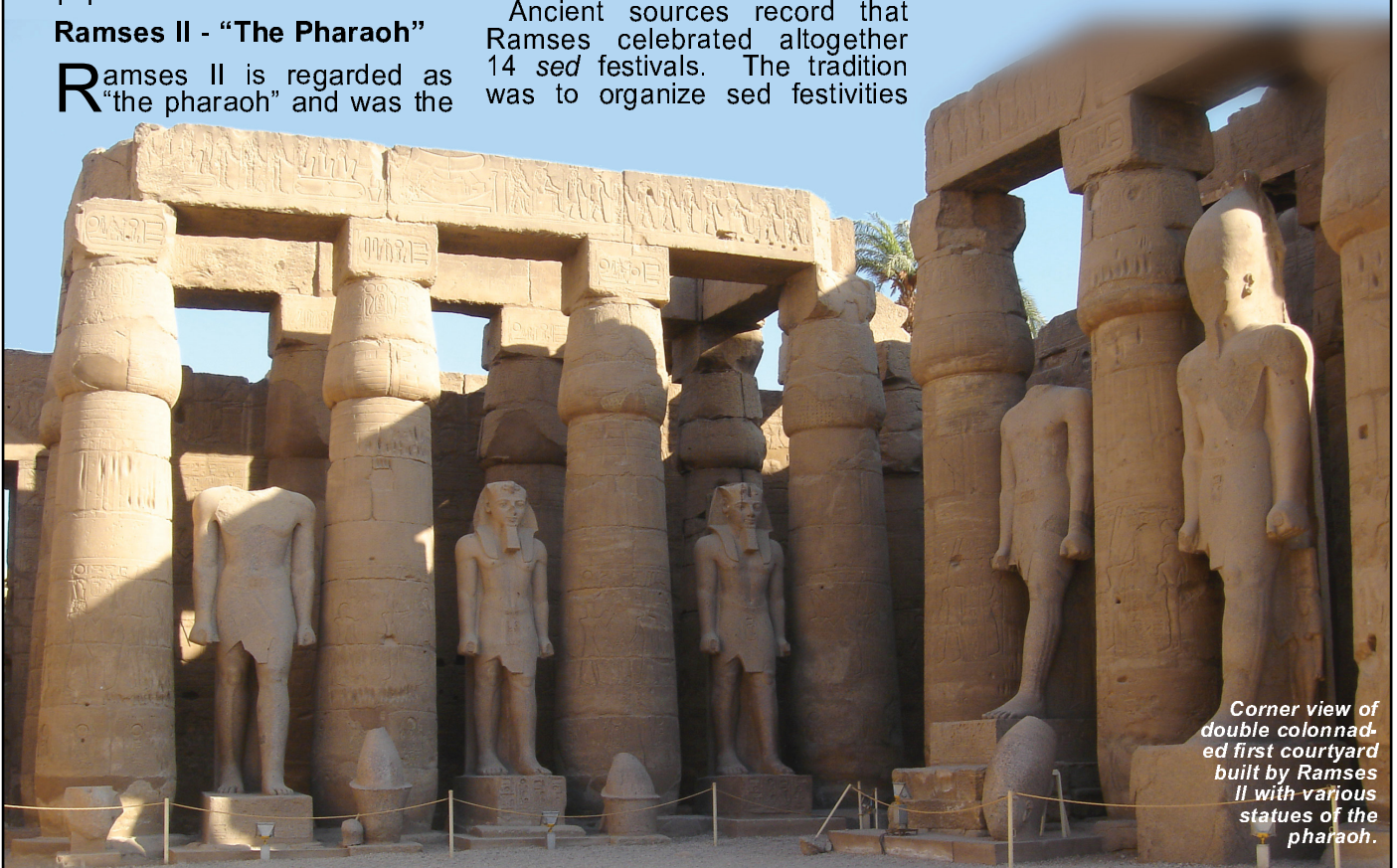
Ancient sources record that Ramses celebrated altogether 14 *sed* festivals. The tradition was to organize *sed* festivities

for the first time after 30 years of reign to reinforce the royal powers and demonstrate ongoing support from gods, thereafter *sed* festivities took place every three years.

One has to look at the sequence of buildings and space to understand why the next huge hall was built slightly off angle by Ramses II in front of Amenhotep's Luxor temple. Ramses wanted to add a bigger court yard and pylon and for this he included the existing shrines of the holy trinity of Amun, Mut and Chons and adjusted his pylon angle to be in line with this shrine built by Hatshepsut 200 years earlier.

Today one enters this court yard surrounded by double columned galleries measuring 57x51m through the massive first pylon and does not immediately realize that this is the only temple in ancient Egypt which does not comply to the strict and straight geometrical lay out and exact 90 degree corners.

With the rise of Islam in the 7th century AD, when the deserted Luxor temple was covered approximately up to 6-8m high with numerous layers of mud over time by the annual Nile floods, a mosque was built behind the left pylon wall, which unfortunately cannot be removed today for excavations below, as it still being used and in addition houses the grave of Abu al Haggag.



Corner view of double colonnaded first courtyard built by Ramses II with various statues of the pharaoh.

Detailed view of the base of obelisk in front of the entrance pylon & 14m high seated Ramses II statue and head of another destroyed Ramses statue.



Relief on side of colossal Ramses II statue. Tying knots represents the unification of Upper & Lower Egypt.



Detail view of seven meter high Ramses II statue in first colonnaded courtyard built by him with 74 lotus bundle style columns supporting the missing roof.



All Egyptian temples follow the same layout whereby the 1st pylon is the highest structure followed by an impressive tenemos style court yard and various further pylons and colonnaded halls. These halls become smaller in heights and width leading to the inner sanctuary.

This is achieved with stairs, raised floors, lowered ceilings and reduced width. The inner chambers also become darker, as the openings for air circulation and light become small slits. The biggest such temple complex using this lay-out is Karnak with 10 pylons, major halls and many holy chambers and numerous side temples added by the many pharaohs.

**Picture Program & Relief Scenes**

Now let's look at some of the most interesting relief scenes, which are significant for understanding the ancient Egyptian cultural history. We actually can be very happy to have these more than 4,000 year old detailed stories on wall relief survived all the environmental

and human destruction over time. Very telling scenes are found on the walls of the small mammisi or birth chamber to the left of the inner sanctuary. The so-called picture program on the walls has to be read from left to right and from bottom to top row.

Starting with the first scene in which ram headed creator god Chnum creates on his potter wheel from clay two boys, one being pharaoh Amenhotep and a copy representing his soul, or ka as ancient Egyptians called the soul. Mother goddess Isis is overlooking this creation process, which is followed by scenes of god Chnum and main deity sun god Amun.

Another relief shows Amun seated holding hands with queen Mutemweje, the mother of Amenhotep. The feet of both being tickled by war goddesses Neith in her protecting role to mothers and death goddess Selket in her protecting role with resurrection powers. This scene indicates the divine intercourse with the queen to induce and create the next pharaoh. Then Isis is embracing Mutemweje in front of Amun to give her divine support and blessing to

the expecting mother.

The middle relief row depicts ibis headed moon god Thot announcing to Mutemweje the birth of a son and showing her together with gods Chnum and Isis. Another relief covers the birth guarded by evil protecting dwarf god Bes and hippo-headed pregnant mother goddess Thoeris.

Followed by Isis handing the new born future pharaoh to Amun to demonstrate that he is god sent. The next picture shows Amun taking him on his arm accompanied by main mother goddesses Hathor and lion headed heaven goddess Mut.

The upper row contains many more relief scenes with further gods supporting the future monarch such as: falcon headed god of kings Horus and jackal headed protecting death god Anubis. Finally Amenhotep is shown as god-like king. The old Egyptian Pantheon counted more than 500 gods. Many of those had similar functions and some were only regional practically doing the same



Ramses II head from one of the colossal statues in front of the pylon with typical Nemes head scarf and royal false beard. The center hole carried a raised cobra possibly made of pure gold.

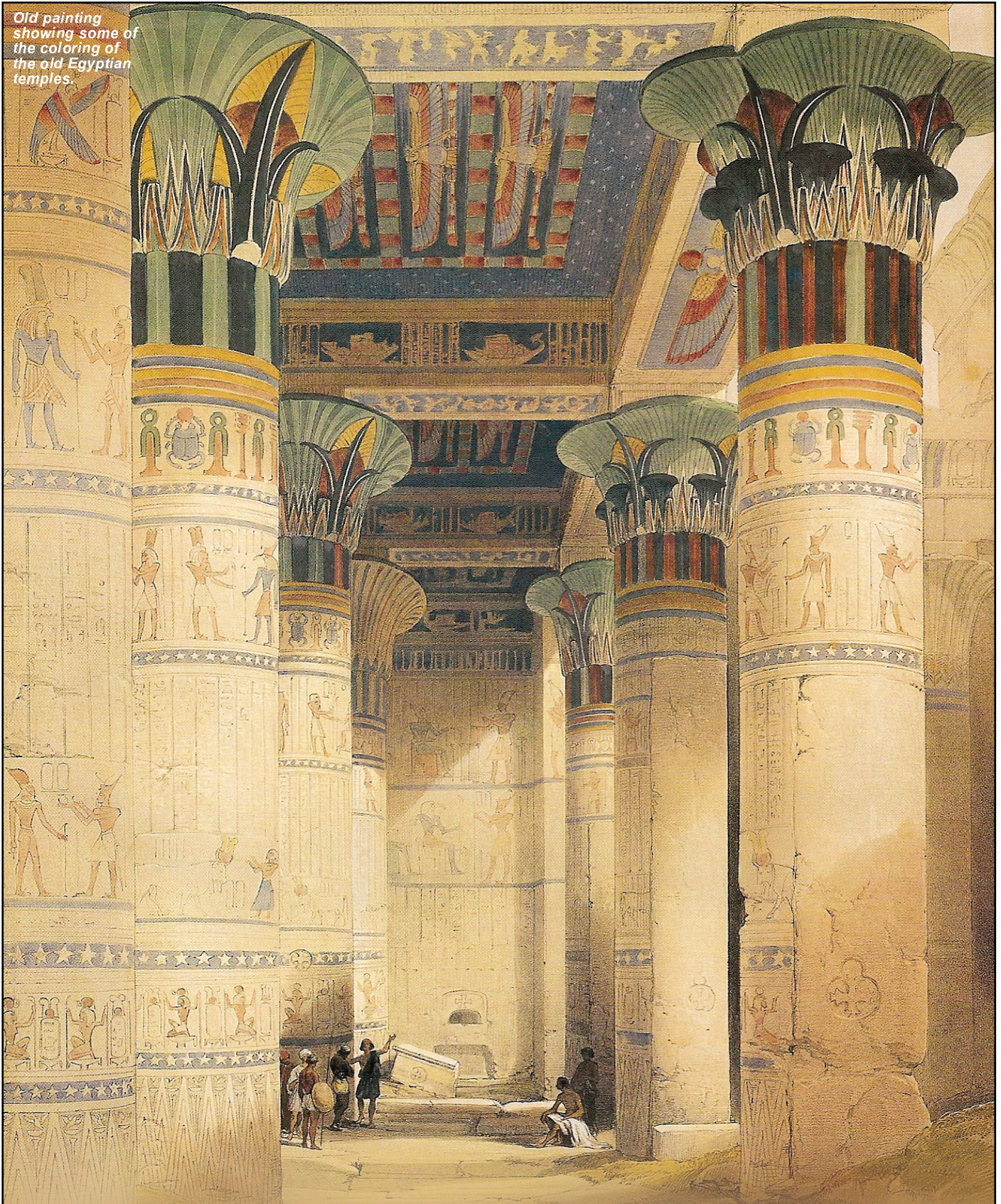


Colossal 8m high seated Ramses II statue with double crown "shenti" at the entrance to the second hall built by Amenhotep III, the other main creator of the Luxor temple complex.



Ramses double colonnaded courtyard with various statues of pharaohs with Nemes head scarf and holding in both hands the important "ankh" sign representing eternal life.

Old painting showing some of the coloring of the old Egyptian temples.



job as others in a different city.

It is also important to understand that their importance and cults were subject to changes over time. Nevertheless the basic picture program was cast in stone and was maintained for over 3,000 years with very little change.

It is also no wonder, that the

above described god like pharaoh birth scene or mammisi sequence of ancient Egyptian religious history is close to identical to the Christian Christmas story. There is no doubt that the long Egyptian rule over Palestine left its influence and marks.

In summary Luxor is one of the many "must see" destinations. It

is very different to the pyramids because its temples are much more refined in architecture and wall relief.

They also give a first impression of the colorful painted walls, as nobody can really imagine how this temples looked like in antiquity being 100% covered with colored pictures.