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TEMPLE FESTIVALS OF THE PTOLEMAIC AND  
ROMAN PERIODS

مهرجانات المعابد البطلمية والرومانية

*Filip Coppens*

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## TEMPLE FESTIVALS OF THE PTOLEMAIC AND ROMAN PERIODS

### مهرجانات المعابد البطلمية والرومانية

Filip Coppens

Tempelfeste ptolemäischer und römischer Zeit  
Les fêtes de temple des époques ptolémaïques et romaines

*Egyptian temples of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods provided the setting for the dramatic performance of various cultic activities, such as festivals. This overview describes the nature, distribution (national; regional; local), and setting (within the temple; within the precinct; outside the temple domain) of these festivals, as well as our main sources of information (reliefs; inscriptions; current research) relating to them. A few representative examples, including the national feast of the "Opening of the Year," the regional "Beautiful Feast of Behdet," involving Dendara and Edfu, and the local celebration of the "Coronation of the Sacred Falcon" in Edfu, are covered here in greater detail to exemplify the nature and proceedings of the festivals.*

أتاحت المعابد المصرية في الفترة البطلمية والرومانية مكاناً للأداء الدرامي للنشاطات الطائفية المختلفة مثل المهرجانات. تعطي هذه المقالة نظرة عامة عن طبيعة هذه المهرجانات و عن توزيع مواقعها المختلفة (سواء على الصعيد المحلي أو الإقليمي)، و أيضاً عن مكانها (سواء كانت داخل المعبد؛ ضمن حرم المعبد؛ أو كانت خارج مجال المعبد)، بالإضافة إلى مناقشة مصادر معلوماتنا الرئيسية عن المهرجانات مثل النقوش والكتابات والبحوث الجارية. تتناول المقالة أيضاً بتفصيل بعض المهرجانات مثل المهرجان الوطني <<بداية العام>>، المهرجان الإقليمي <<عيد بحدت الجميل>> الذي يتضمن دندرة وإدفو، و الإحتفال المحلي لـ <<تتويج الصقر المقدس>> بإدفو.

**T**he Egyptian temple domains of Ptolemaic and Roman times formed the center stage for the dramatic performance of various cultic ceremonies, processions, and rituals throughout the year. The cultic activities performed in and around the temples are commonly divided, based on how frequently they took place, into two main types: daily rituals and annual festivals. These two types of ceremonies, in essence very similar and characterized by their cyclical nature (whether they took place every day or just once a year), reflect the Egyptian cyclical concept of time.

In the daily rising and setting of the sun, the coming and going of the seasons, the phases of the moon, and the ever-recurring annual inundation of the Nile, the Egyptians observed the cyclical aspect of many natural phenomena and construed their ceremonies and festivals along a similar pattern. An ever-recurring theme in almost all festivals is their focus on fertility, birth, and the continued renewal of life. Also regularly featured in these festivals are the references to the confirmation of the existing world-order, personified by the legitimate pharaoh, and the victory over the forces of chaos.

The essence of both the daily temple ritual and the annual festival consisted of “seeing the god” or “revealing his (i.e., the god’s) face” (*mꜣꜣ nṯr/wn-ḥr*), and the “appearance” (*ḥꜣw*) and “coming out” (*pꜣt*) of the statue of the deity. A recurring part of both the daily and the annual rites included the statue’s purification, anointment, clothing with linen, and adornment with regalia. In the daily temple ritual all activities remained confined to the main sanctuary of the temple; however, during the festivals the statues of the gods left the confines of their residence within the temple and often made a dramatic appearance in the outside world. The most typical and recurring aspect of all the festivals was indeed the appearance in procession of the statues of the gods from the sanctuary, chapels, or the temple crypts (fig. 1). This feature constitutes the major difference between the rather “passive” daily temple ritual and the “active” annual festivals. (For a general introduction to the processional festivals, consult: Altenmüller 1977; Assmann 1991; Bleeker 1967: 23 - 50; Finnestad 1998: 203 - 226; Spalinger 2001; Stadler 2008).

The processions with statues were reminiscent of the journey of the sun and the concept of (re)birth. Such processions often embarked from the darkness of the sanctuary or crypt, representing at times the netherworld or a tomb in which the “lifeless” statues resided (Finnestad 1998: 216; Waitkus 1997: 254 - 256, 258, 262 - 272), and proceeded to the sunlight outside the temple, which evoked notions of renewal and revitalization. The concept of a journey from darkness to light was also clearly reflected in the architectural layout of the temple: the statues of the gods left the sanctuary or crypt immersed in darkness, and on their way out passed through ever-broader and brighter halls, to finally appear through the gate of the pylon like the morning sun on the horizon (fig. 2).

An important, if superficial, source of information on the numerous Egyptian festivals and processions is provided by the eleven extensive temple-calendars engraved

upon the walls of the temples of Edfu, Kom Ombo, Dendara, and Esna (Alliot 1949 - 1954: 197 - 302; Cauville 2002: 5 - 14; Grimm 1994; Sauneron 1962: 1 - 28). These calendars often provide little more than the name of the festival and the date and length of its celebration, which could last from a single day to several weeks. Occasionally, the calendars also indicate in a very general manner the main themes of the feast and at times even the location(s) where it took place, but do not allow any detailed reconstruction of the rituals carried out during the feast or their particular sequence. Another important, although indirect, source of information regarding the temple festivals comprises several of the decrees that resulted from the annual priestly synods at the Ptolemaic court in Alexandria. The organization of the temples and the cult, including the festivals, formed an important topic of debate during these meetings (consult Hölbl 2001: 77 - 123 for a general introduction to these decrees). Most of the feasts mentioned in the temple calendars and priestly decrees can be dated to much earlier periods in Egyptian history; nonetheless, for a significant number of festivals we possess few references from prior eras.

Although only a fraction of the textual material on the organization of Egyptian feasts has been preserved, it has been possible to reconstruct with some degree of accuracy the actual proceedings of a very limited group of Ptolemaic and Roman festivals on the basis of a series of hymns and scenes engraved on the temple walls. This is particularly the case for the temples at Edfu, Dendara, and Esna, whose walls describe the various ritual events that took place during some of the festivals. These festivals and processions can be divided into different categories on the basis of their local setting (within the temple, and inside or outside the temple precinct) and their geographical importance or impact (national, regional and local).

A festive procession could take place within the temple itself, the statues being carried to other chapels or halls inside the temple or to constructions on its roof. The temples of



Figure 1 Procession of the statue of Horus on the occasion of the Festival of the Coronation of the Sacred Falcon, temple of Edfu.



Figure 2 Pylon of the temple of Horus at Edfu, symbolizing the horizon where the statue of the god would appear, like the sun in the horizon.

Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt were especially suited for processions inside the temple. The increasing number of enclosure walls that surrounded the temple proper in this period formed a series of corridors that were used for festive processions, which thus took place in the open air but were still hidden from view. The celebration of the “Opening of the Year” (*wꜥ-rꜥꜣt*)—heralding the arrival of the inundation—is an example of a festive procession that took place entirely within the temple walls. This feast of the New Year was a national festival celebrated in all temples, but it is best known from the temples of Edfu and Dendara. Although the specific rites and activities performed differed from place to place (often starting as early as the end of the month of *Mesore* and proceeding during the five epagomenal days), a general pattern of the processional activities has emerged for New Year’s Day. The statues would be carried in procession from their resting place in temple chapels and crypts to the complex of *wabet* and court—a set of two chambers consisting of an open court and a slightly elevated chapel—where they were purified, clothed, and adorned (fig. 3; Coppens 2007; Traunecker 1995). The procession would then continue to a kiosk on the roof of the temple, where, through the ritual of the “opening of the mouth” and the exposure to the sunlight, the statues would be revitalized and reunited with their *ba*, or “divine power/manifestation” (fig. 4; Alliot 1949 - 1954: 303 - 433; Cauville 1984: 73; 2002: 35 - 49; Corthals 2003; Daumas 1969: 96 - 101; 1982: 466 - 472; Fairman 1954 - 1955: 183 - 189).

Processions with statues were not limited to the interior halls and chapels of the temple, but also regularly took place outside the temple, either within or outside its precinct. These festivals offered the general population the opportunity of closer contact with their deities; thus multitudes of believers would gather along the procession routes, especially when the statues of the gods would leave the precinct. The processions also provided the Egyptians with the opportunity to make use of the oracular powers of their divinities.

Within the temple precinct, the procession could journey towards the birth temple (“*mammisi*”) or the sacred lake, among other places. For instance, at the temple of Dendara, a large number of deity-statues often traveled to the bark station and the sacred lake in the month of *Tybi* (fig. 5; Cauville 1993; 2002: 28 - 29; Preys 2002: 563 - 565), while the goddess Hathor journeyed in procession to the *mammisi* on no less than six occasions throughout the year (fig. 6; Cauville 2002: 26 - 28).



Figure 3 The *wabet* (part of complex of *wabet* and court) in the temple of Dendara: an important stage on the processional journey of the statues of the gods on New Year’s Day.

Of the processions that took place outside the temple precinct (occasions when the statue of the god would be carried, or sailed, to other temples or sacred sites), the best-known regional example from Ptolemaic times is undoubtedly the “Beautiful Feast of Behdet” (*shꜥn nꜥꜣr n Bꜥḥdt*). The central themes of this festival, which took place in the month of *Epiphi*, were fertility and regeneration. It



Figure 4 Kiosk on the roof of the temple of Dendara: the final stage of the processional journey of the statues of the gods on New Year's Day.



Figure 5 Bark station and sacred lake in the temple precinct of Dendara.

was in essence a popular festival and involved the public more than most other festivals, since it took place largely outside the temple precinct. The festival is described in great detail and depicted on the walls of the open court in the temple of Edfu (figs. 7, 8; Chassinat: Edfou V: 28 - 35, 124 - 136; Edfou X, pls. cxxi-cxxii, cxxvi-cxxvii). It consisted of a 180-kilometer journey that the statue of the goddess Hathor undertook by boat from Dendara to Edfu. On the way to Edfu the procession would halt at several towns, including Thebes and Hierakonpolis, to pay a visit to the deities in the local temples. From Hierakonpolis onwards, the local form of the god Horus would accompany Hathor on her journey to Edfu in his own boat. Numerous pilgrims would gather at these towns to witness the procession of the goddess; other Egyptians would observe the boat of the

goddess passing by from the shores of the Nile; and official delegations from, among other places, Elephantine and Hierakonpolis were sent to the final destination, Edfu, to partake in the festival. The central act of the festival was the visit of the main deities of Edfu (Horus and Hathor in particular) to the necropolis of Behdet to bring offerings to Edfu's ancestor gods. The aim of the rites and acts performed was the regeneration of the ancestor gods, together with a general regeneration of the whole of Egypt. (Alliot 1949 - 1954: 442 - 560; Cauville 1984: 69 - 70; 2002: 59 - 64; Daumas 1969: 101 - 102; Fairman 1954 - 1955: 196 - 200; Kurth 1994a; 1994b: 156 - 179; Preys 2002: 556 - 562).

In contrast to festivals celebrated nationwide or within a specific region, a large number of festivals were both geographically and theologically limited to a single temple and its immediate surroundings. These festivals had their own local character, often inspired by the local deities and the general nature of the temple. The proceedings of several of these feasts are known from the temples of Edfu, Dendara, and Esna. The temple precinct of Edfu was, for instance, the setting for a number of festive processions involving the falcon god Horus and often focusing on his association with the kingship of Egypt. The "Festival of the Coronation of the Sacred Falcon" (*hꜥw nswt*) was but one of many examples of this type of feast. It was celebrated during the first days of the month of *Tybi* and is depicted in detail on the inner face of the temple's enclosure wall (fig. 9; Chassinat: Edfou VI: 92 - 104, 143 - 157, 262 - 274, 298 - 309; Edfou X: pl. cxlix). The festival followed almost immediately upon the feasts surrounding the internment and resurrection of the god Osiris, in his role as ruler of Egypt and father of Horus, at the end of the month of *Khoiak*. On the first day of the fifth month of the year, Horus, as the son and legitimate heir of Osiris, assumed the kingship over the two lands. The annual Festival of the Coronation of the Sacred Falcon can be seen as a re-enactment of both Horus and the ruling pharaoh taking their rightful place upon the throne of Egypt. The



Figure 6 The two birth houses (“mammisi”) within the temple precinct of Dendara.

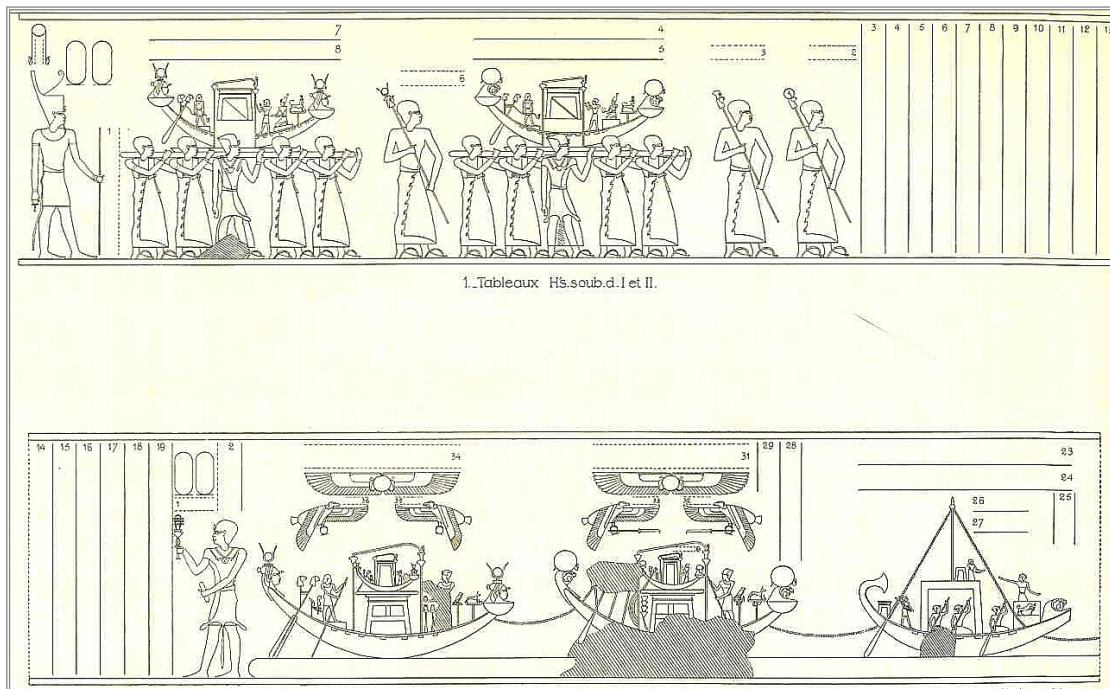


Figure 7 Selection of scenes from the Beautiful Feast of Behdet, depicted on the walls of the open court, temple of Edfu.

main events of this festival consisted of a series of processions within the temple precinct. The main stages of the feast included: a procession of the falcon-headed statue of Horus from the sanctuary to the “Temple of the Sacred Falcon” (fig. 1), located in front of the main temple; the election of a sacred falcon, reared within the temple precinct, as the heir of the god (fig. 10); the display of this falcon (from the platform between the two wings of the pylon) to the crowd of people gathered in front of the temple (fig. 2); the falcon’s coronation in the temple; and, finally, a festive meal in the “Temple of the Sacred Falcon” (Alliot 1949 - 1954: 282 - 284, 561 - 676; Cauville 2002: 72 - 73; Drioton 1948; Fairman 1954 - 1955: 189 - 192).

Another important festival in the temple of Edfu of which more than the name has been preserved is the “Festival of Victory” (*hb kni*). Depicted on the interior of the enclosure wall (Chassinat: Edfou X: pls. cxlvii-cxlviii; Edfou XIII: pls. cccxciv-dxiv, dxviii-dxxxiii), it celebrated the victory of Horus over his enemies (Alliot 1949 - 1954: 677 - 822; Blackman and Fairman 1942, 1943, 1944; Cauville 1984: 70 - 72; Fairman 1935; 1954 - 1955: 192 - 196; 1974).

The temple of Esna provided the setting of a series of local festivals celebrated throughout the year, described in detail on the columns of its pronaos (Sauneron 1962). The most important of these festivals took place on the first day of *Phamenoth* and was a

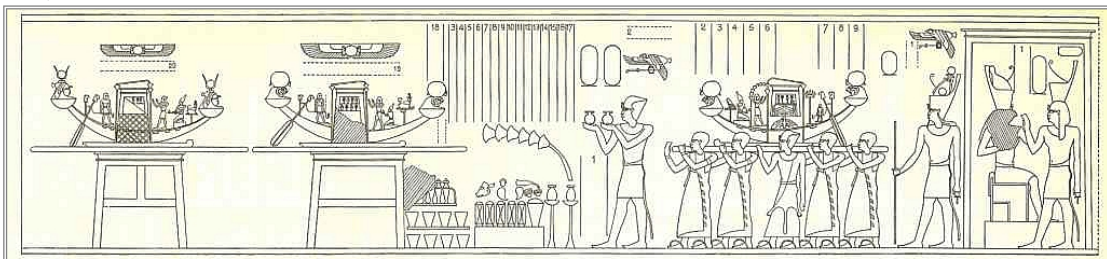


Figure 8 Selection of scenes from the Beautiful Feast of Behdet depicted on the walls of the open court, temple of Edfu.

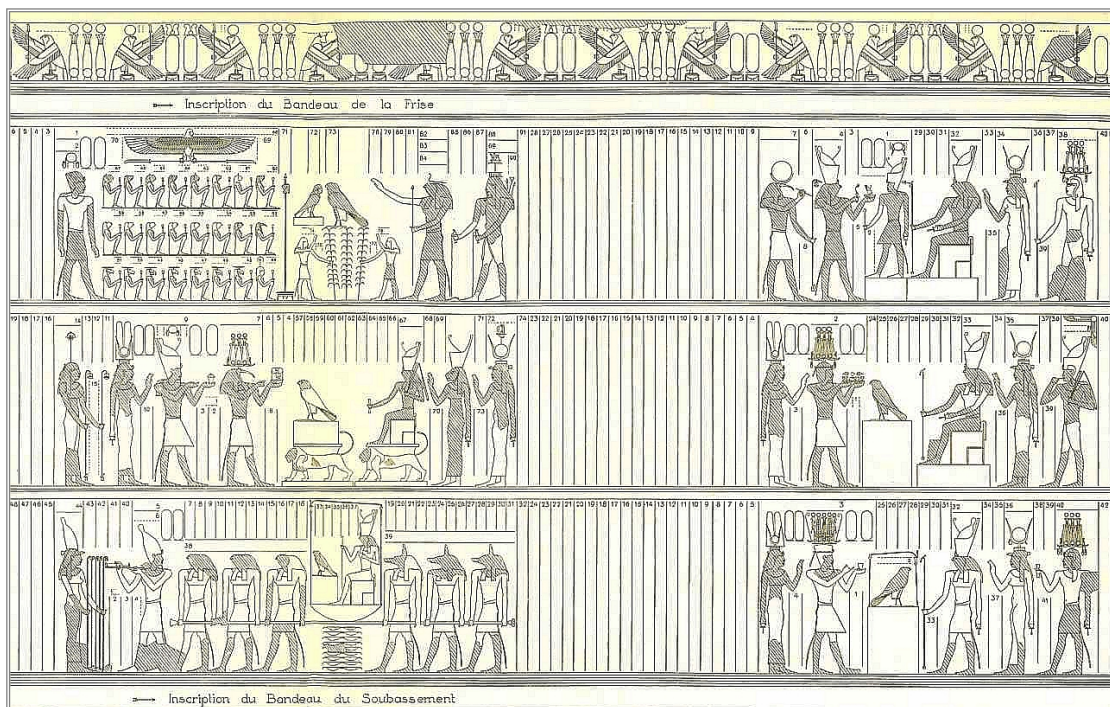


Figure 9 Selection of scenes from the Festival of the Coronation of the Sacred Falcon on the interior of the enclosure wall, temple of Edfu.



Figure 10 The sacred falcon during the Festival of the Coronation of the Sacred Falcon, temple of Edfu.

combination of the local festival of the “Installation of the Potter’s Wheel,” a feast of local deity Khnum, and the Memphite festival of “Lifting up the Sky,” in honor of the god Ptah. Other important feasts that took place in and around the temple of Esna were the celebrations surrounding the “Arrival of Neith

in Sais” and the “Festival of the Victory of Khnum” in the month of *Epiphi*. One of the best-known local festivals celebrated in Dendara was the “Festival of Intoxication” (*hb th*). The feast, described in detail on the walls of the pronaos, was celebrated in the month of *Tboth* and focused on the return of “the raging goddess from the South” and her enthronement (Cauville 2002: 50 - 59, 68 - 107, pls. 1 - 11, i-xx; Sternberg-el-Hotabi 1992).

Other local festivities, similar to the ones mentioned above, took place in temples throughout Egypt, but very little is known of the nature and procedures of most of these feasts. A singular concept, however, appears to have been at the core of the numerous festivals celebrated throughout the year in Ptolemaic and Roman temples: it brought the statues of the gods in procession out of the confines of their residence in the temple, and through the performance of a series of ritual activities aimed to secure an ever-continuing renewal of life, fertility, and the established world-order. Concomitantly, the festivals often provided a unique and undoubtedly dramatic opportunity for the local populace to come into contact with their deities.

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A general study of the nature and typical components of the festivals of the Ptolemaic and Roman temples can be consulted in the paper by Finnestad (1998), which contains numerous references to earlier studies. The proceedings of individual festivals have been studied in detail for the temples of Edfu (Alliot 1949 - 1954; Fairman 1954 - 1955; Kurth 1994b), Dendara (Cauville 2002), and Esna (Sauneron 1962).

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- Figure 1 Procession of the statue of Horus on the occasion of the Festival of the Coronation of the Sacred Falcon, temple of Edfu. (Photo by the author.)
- Figure 2 Pylon of the temple of Horus at Edfu, symbolizing the horizon where the statue of the god would appear, like the sun in the horizon. (Photo by the author.)
- Figure 3 The *wabet* (part of complex of *wabet* and court) in the temple of Dendara: an important stage on the processional journey of the statues of the gods on New Year's Day. (Photo by the author.)
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- Figure 5 Bark station and sacred lake in the temple precinct of Dendara. (Photo by the author.)
- Figure 6 The two birth houses ("mammisi") within the temple precinct of Dendara. (Photo by the author.)

- Figure 7 Selection of scenes from the Beautiful Feast of Behdet, depicted on the walls of the open court, temple of Edfu. (Chassinat: Edfou X: pl. cxxi.)
- Figure 8 Selection of scenes from the Beautiful Feast of Behdet depicted on the walls of the open court, temple of Edfu. (Chassinat: Edfou X: pl. cxxvii.)
- Figure 9 Selection of scenes from the Festival of the Coronation of the Sacred Falcon on the interior of the enclosure wall, temple of Edfu. (Chassinat: Edfou X: pl. cxlix.)
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