

“The Triumph of Horus” at Edfu:
Describe the contents and depictions of
the ancient ‘religious drama’ and analyse it.

The “Triumph of Horus” in its most complete form, is located on the outer western enclosing wall of the temple of Horus at Edfu, as shown in Figure 1. It is part of a description of the Festival of the Victory of Horus, which took place from the 21st to the 25th of the second month of winter.¹ The reliefs were carved during a period of civil war between Ptolemy X and Ptolemy XI, and although either may have intended performances to strengthen their claims, their identity with the texts is kept purposely vague.² Derived from the text of a ‘religious drama,’ it was performed annually at Edfu in commemoration of: Horus' wars with Seth, his final victory, his coronation as king of a united Egypt, the dismemberment of the body of his foe, and his 'triumph' or 'justification' before the tribunal of gods in the 'Broad Hall.'³ There is some debate as to the nature of this performance, whether it can be considered as a play performed in front of an audience, or if it has more ritualistic connotations, or even if the king himself was involved. What is clear is that the temple complex was extremely important both religiously and economically for the Ptolemies, and helped to bolster their rule in Egypt.

The temple itself – known as Apollonopolis Magna during the Greco-Roman period – is located on the west bank of the river Nile, south of Thebes, and is dedicated to the triad of Horus, Hathor and Harsomtus. Construction began under Ptolemy III on 23 August 237 BC. The temple became key in legitimising Ptolemaic rule in Egypt, as the foreign rulers upholding Ma’at (order) in Egypt, were inferred by Horus’ triumphs over Seth and the kings

¹ Blackman and Fairman (1942), p. 37.

² Fairman (1973), pp. 14-17.

³ Blackman and Fairman (1942), p. 37.

role within them. The contents and depictions of the drama in Edfu will need to be analysed in detail, in order to fully assess the impact of “the Triumph of Horus” on the Ptolemaic dynasty, as well as religiosity.

“The Triumph of Horus” is one of five texts of the Myth of Horus inscribed on the east and west enclosure walls in Edfu Temple.⁴ It is referred to as Myth C, and differs from the others, which are viewed as more traditional or historical narratives. Fairman describes it as a “dramatized version of the exploits of Horus which was enacted at his festival.”⁵ The text is made up of eleven tableaux, each with a horizontal label, captions on the figures and a block of text.⁶ Figure 2 shows the arrangement of reliefs on the western enclosure wall. Eight of the eleven tableaux depict Horus in a boat armed with a harpoon and accompanied by the king, or, other gods. The other three depict the dismemberment of Seth and an interlude. Figure 3 shows the typical layout of a scene from act 1, and is one of the majorities mentioned above.

The text consists of a prologue, three acts, and an epilogue. The Prologue,⁷ shown in Figure 4, contains a scene in which Horus of Behdet, flanked by Thoth and Isis, begins his hunt of Seth. The king is also featured, wearing the headdress of Onuris or Anhur, an Egyptian war god. Act 1,⁸ ‘the harpoon ritual: propitiating the god and his weapons’ shown in Figure 5, is made of five scenes each similar in nature. This is often referred to as the ‘ritual of ten harpoons;’ Horus, sometimes aided by the king, uses these to defeat Seth. This is followed by Act 2,⁹ ‘The rejoicing over the victory’ in Figure 6, which has two scenes, with hymns from the gods and royal children. In scene II, the people proclaim Horus crowned and

⁴ Fairman (1935), p. 26.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Fairman (1973), pp. 16-17.

⁷ Blackman and Fairman (1943), p. 2.

⁸ Blackman and Fairman (1943), p. 6.

⁹ Blackman and Fairman (1944), p. 5.

invested with the emblems of Kingship. Act 3,¹⁰ as seen in Figure 7, has three scenes: two versions of the dismemberment of Seth and the distribution of his body parts in the form of ‘hippo cake’ to be eaten by the gods and the city. As stated above, both of these versions are split by an interlude. Finally, the Epilogue,¹¹ is a declaration of the triumph of Horus, but has no relief to accompany the text.

It is likely that text inscribed on the temple wall at Edfu was copied from a New Kingdom papyrus, as Fairman states “There is strong evidence . . . that ‘the triumph of Horus’ is based directly on a text that, at the latest, was compiled in the late New Kingdom.”¹² A known example of another version of the text is that of the Louvre papyrus N3176.¹³ It is clear that the text has important religious connotations, especially when linked with the local cult of Edfu, as Horus was the chief deity. As previously mentioned, the Festival of Horus was celebrated annually within the temple complex. The rituals and dramas performed as part of this celebration must have been significant in maintaining the order of the temple, allowing it to function as both a religious and economic centre. In addition, it represented the power of the Ptolemaic dynasty and their dedication to Egyptian traditions as a means of strengthening their rule. It is important to consider not only what the “Triumph of Horus” means in a religious context, but also to understand its references to kingship. This was an indicator of the Ptolemies efforts to appease any who might have opposed their ruling.

One of the main aspects of “the Triumph of Horus” is the ‘ritual of the ten harpoons’ or, at least, the concept of hippo hunting with religious connotations. Certainly, depictions of the king hunting hippopotami appear from the first dynasty onwards, as shown in Figure 8. There is, however, some doubt as to whether the earlier predynastic depictions show a

¹⁰ Blackman and Fairman (1944), p. 10.

¹¹ Blackman and Fairman (1944), p. 15.

¹² Fairman (1937), p. 35.

¹³ Gillam (2005), p. 116.

religious ritual or are simply hunting scenes.¹⁴ Portrayal of the king in this way occurs throughout Egyptian history from the Old Kingdom, right through to the triumph of Horus in the Greco-Roman period. Pictorial representations most often appear in private tombs, particularly in the Theban area during the New Kingdom, inferring a religious aspect. Royal involvement within these scenes has many layers of meaning, and is suggested to convey not only the king's physical strength and superiority, but also his struggle and victory over the forces of chaos.

Säve-Söderbergh notes in his publication 'Hippopotamus Hunting as a Religious Motive,' that from the earliest times, the king "was regarded as being identical with the chief god."¹⁵ He explains that this is linked to the Horus name of the king, and the falcon god's role as chief god of those kings who united Egypt. In addition to this, a symbolic meaning can also be understood; the king's battle with the hippopotamus symbolises the ruler's victory over chaos, re-establishing order and renewing the world as its sole creator.¹⁶ Säve-Söderbergh points out that "the enthronement of Horus as a king is equated with the rising of the sun."¹⁷ Applying this to "the Triumph of Horus" indicates that the Ptolemaic dynasty was equated with Horus as a unifier of Egypt and victor over chaos.

Taking all this into account, it is clear that "the Triumph of Horus" was based on a ritualistic tradition spanning a large expanse of Egyptian history. The meaning behind depicting the Ptolomies in this way would most likely have been very clear to the Egyptian population. While it is true that many would not have had access into the temple, they would have been part of the celebrations during the festival of Horus, in which "the Triumph of Horus" was performed.

¹⁴ Fairman (1937), p. 35.

¹⁵ Säve-Söderbergh (1953), p. 16.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Säve-Söderbergh (1953), p. 27.

Kingship is another important element of “the Triumph of Horus.” Act 2, Scene II, shown in Figure 9, shows Horus crowned and invested with the emblems of kingship. The king seems to be absent from the scene both physically and vocally, but Fairman proposes the opposite is true; “The king is now the Living Horus on earth, the triumph of Horus is his triumph, the coronation of Horus is his coronation.”¹⁸ Undoubtedly the king and Horus are considered to be one and the same at this moment in the story. Thoth is shown giving Horus the insignia of kingship, while the Upper and Lower Egyptian princesses sing hymns of celebration accompanied by the queen, playing the sistrum. It is easy to see how this scene translates into the performance of the story during the festival of Horus.

The king’s role within “the Triumph of Horus” should not be underestimated; at many points he is equated with Horus. The placing of his appearances is also significant; he appears in the Prologue being likened “to the lord of Mesen, and acclaims him as a warrior and a hunter.”¹⁹ He assists Horus in slaying his foes three times in turn helping to secure a prosperous reign. In Act 3, Scene III, he again appears as an equal of Horus, “Triumphant in the Broad Hall and conqueror of Asia.”²⁰ Finally, in the Epilogue, “his name comes last in the list of divinities and cities whose foes have been over-thrown.”²¹ One key point is summarised by Blackman and Fairman, “The king is thus, so to speak, the Alpha and Omega of the whole performance.”²² This implies how central the king’s role must have been, and could only help to further legitimisation and acceptance of Ptolemaic rule over Egypt.

The role of “the Triumph of Horus” within the Festival of Horus is quite significant, as many suggest it should be considered a play as opposed to simply a religious ritual. Although it is obvious that religion plays a crucial role in the story, it is a role that would

¹⁸ Fairman (1937), p. 105.

¹⁹ Blackman and Fairman (1942), p. 37.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

have been viewed by the Egyptians as an essential part of the success of the festival as a whole.

The text is written in a way that is unlike other works found on temple walls. As Gillam states, the longer texts that accompany the scenes are more unusual than the normal scenes containing only figures with relating captions.²³ The “Triumph of Horus” is different as it contains not only narrative and dialogue, but also hymns, invocations and stage directions. Admittedly, the headings and directions are fragmentary, as pointed out by Blackman and Fairman, “there are no stage directions except in Act I, Scene IV, and Act III, Scene III.”²⁴ They suggest the reason for this was that the version on the wall at Edfu was copied from a text compiled in the late New Kingdom and placed within the temple library. This would account for the absence of conventional headings to introduce the speakers, found frequently in earlier works, such as the Memphite and Ramesseum Dramatic texts.²⁵

It is important to assess the impact of “the Triumph of Horus” in relation to other texts that are dramatic in nature. These texts, the Memphite ‘Creation Play’ which Blackman and Fairman summarise, “comprises a narrative text, short dialogues – introduced by headings stating who are the speakers – and what may be termed stage directions.”²⁶ It is a religious play, and from a much older time period than “the Triumph of Horus.” The Ramesseum ‘Coronation Drama’ contains the same features, but also includes stage directions which, “make mention of the various theatrical properties required for the due performance of each scene.”²⁷ Both of these are considerably shorter than the “Triumph of Horus,” and there is little or no evidence to justify that they were performed on the same scale, or annually as part of a festival.

²³ Gillam (1952), p. 115.

²⁴ Blackman and Fairman (1942), p. 33.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

Despite this lack of material from one version of the “Triumph of Horus,” the inscribed version of the story is claimed to provide the missing details, “[the reliefs] replace the headings and stage directions...pictorially enumerate the properties [of the play]... boats, weapons, clothes, masks, crowns and other ornaments.”²⁸ It is evident that Blackman and Fairman consider the “Triumph of Horus” a play, and that knowledge of how it was performed should be obtained from all its forms as a whole, whether they are papyri or temple inscriptions.

Others, such as Drioton and Alliot take the view that “the Triumph of Horus” was more a collection of materials, with some performed elements but not a unified whole. Gillam supports the former view, suggesting that attention should be paid to the layout of the story on the wall at Edfu, “Although all the elements . . . can be found elsewhere . . . their use all in one text . . . with pictures . . . with additional dialogue, is very suggestive.”²⁹ Whatever view, it is clear that parts, or all of, “the Triumph of Horus” were performed as part of the annual festival of Horus at Edfu.

If the “Triumph of Horus” was indeed a play, where and how it was performed during the festival must be taken into account. A company of players would have been involved, as would the king, although, as Blackman and Fairman stress, “[his place would] nearly always have been taken by a substitute.”³⁰ The scenes inscribed on the temple walls depict Horus sailing on water as shown in Figure 10, with the text making reference to the harpooning of Seth taking place on the ‘Pool of Horus.’ This indicates the natural setting for a performance at Edfu would be on the sacred lake within the temple complex, shown in Figure 10, where the boat could sail. Blackman and Fairman elaborate further, “those players who

²⁸ Blackman and Fairman (1942), p. 34.

²⁹ Gillam (1954), p. 115.

³⁰ Blackman and Fairman (1942), p. 35.

impersonated Horus [etc.]...being generally in a boat...the king and other characters such as the queen, the princesses [etc.]...remained by the water's edge."³¹

While there is no indication of a large audience, the Chorus does feature and may well have been a role which the spectators joined in with, "[The crowd,] who must have been worked up to a high pitch of excitement and religious emotion by the scenes enacted before them, joined in the cry 'Hold fast, Horus, hold fast!'"³² Fairman however, brings up the point that staging the performance on the lake would incur too many logistical problems and would be too difficult for a large audience to watch, further adding that the front of the temple could have been a possible location.³³ This arrangement would then imply a processional presentation, and while this is a possibility, the evidence of the depictions and the text strongly suggests that the play was performed at the sacred lake. Kurth supports this view, adding, "One can imagine the citizen of Edfu forming the audience, and they may even have taken part."³⁴ Kurth appears to have no problem with the idea that a large audience could be involved if the play was staged on the lake. Figure 11 illustrates that there is plenty of space around the sacred lake, more than enough for a large audience.

In addition to the performance of 'the ritual of the ten harpoons,' it is thought that the final act of the play (the dismemberment of Seth, shown in Figure 12) is also enacted during the festival. This ceremony was not a literal re-enactment but more of a ritualistic one. It is likely that the hippo cake distributed by Isis following the dismemberment would have been made of bread, allowing it to be physically eaten by those taking part, as stated by Blackman and Fairman, "Thus the dismemberment of the victim, enjoined in a stage direction and a speech by Isis, and illustrated in the accompanying relief, could be easily carried out."³⁵ In fact, models would have been used throughout the play, representing hippopotami and the

³¹ Blackman and Fairman (1942), p. 37.

³² Blackman and Fairman (1942), p. 35.

³³ Fairman (1973), pp. 47-50.

³⁴ Kurth (2004), p. 311.

³⁵ Blackman and Fairman (1942), p. 34.

enemies of Horus, and would have been made of clay.³⁶ Miniature clay models were common during ritual ceremonies and the ritual killing of a hippopotamus, as mentioned earlier, is known from the earliest times. Säve-Söderbergh states, “the Edfu rites are no doubt derived from very old traditions, partly at least of Delta origin.”³⁷ Thus, it can be inferred that all parts of the play originated from early Egyptian practices. Such traditions could only have a positive impact on the festival as a whole.

To conclude, the religious drama known as the “Triumph of Horus” played an important role within the temple complex, as well as the local cult in Edfu as it was performed annually as part of the Festival of Horus. In addition to this, it also helped to legitimise and strengthen the rule of the Ptolemaic dynasty at the time. Edfu was seen as a symbol of the power and wealth of the Ptolemies, and also indicated their recognition of the importance of Egypt as a country to their success as rulers. With this aim, their dedication to Egyptian traditions was emphasised by the rituals, ceremonies and plays staged in celebration at Edfu temple.

There is evidence to suggest that the “Triumph of Horus” was based on rites and ceremonies that began from the earliest times in Egyptian history, even if only in the form of a Hippopotamus hunt. The depiction of the king’s involvement and equation with Horus in both the play and the text inscribed on the wall ensured that they would both benefit from their literal and symbolic victory over chaos, and theoretically enabled the Ptolemies to have a prosperous rule. While it is not clear where, or how, the play was performed, the fact that it was performed annually indicated a type of renewal of order to the world, a key religious theme that occurred in many types of ceremonies.

Taking all this into account, the “Triumph of Horus” can be seen as significant, not only as a rare example of an Egyptian drama, but also as a means of legitimising the rule of

³⁶ Blackman and Fairman (1942), p. 34.

³⁷ Säve-Söderbergh (1953), p. 29.

the Ptolemaic dynasty. As well as this, the “Triumph of Horus” can be seen as a major part of an important religious festival within Edfu.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Sketch plan of Temple Enclosure and Ancient Town of Edfu, plus enlarged view of main temple with location of “the Triumph of Horus” marked. Scan sourced from: Fairman, H. W. (1974) 45. *The Triumph of Horus. An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama*. London: B. T. Batsford Ltd.

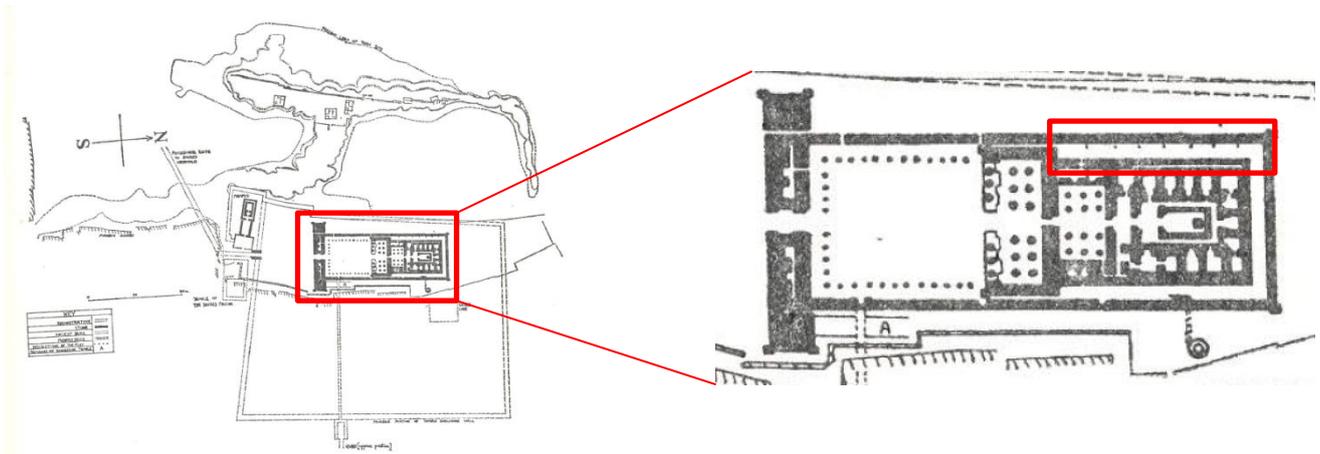


Figure 1: Plan of the temple of Edfu. The location of “The Triumph of Horus is marked out by the red box.

Figure 2: Sketch of the arrangement of reliefs on the temple wall. Scan sourced from: Fairman, H. W. (1974) 15. *The Triumph of Horus. An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama*. London: B. T. Batsford Ltd.

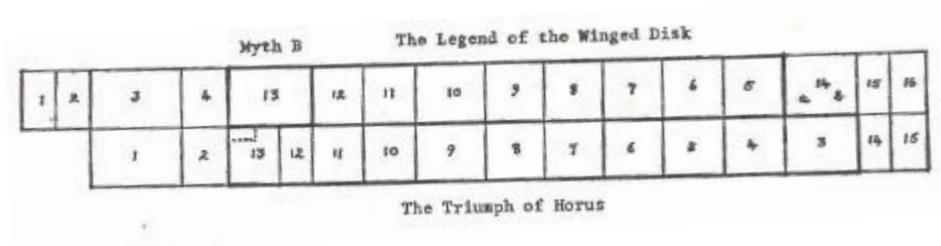


Figure 3: Typical layout of a scene from Act 1. Scan sourced from: Fairman, H. W. (1974)

38. *The Triumph of Horus. An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama.* London: B. T. Batsford Ltd.

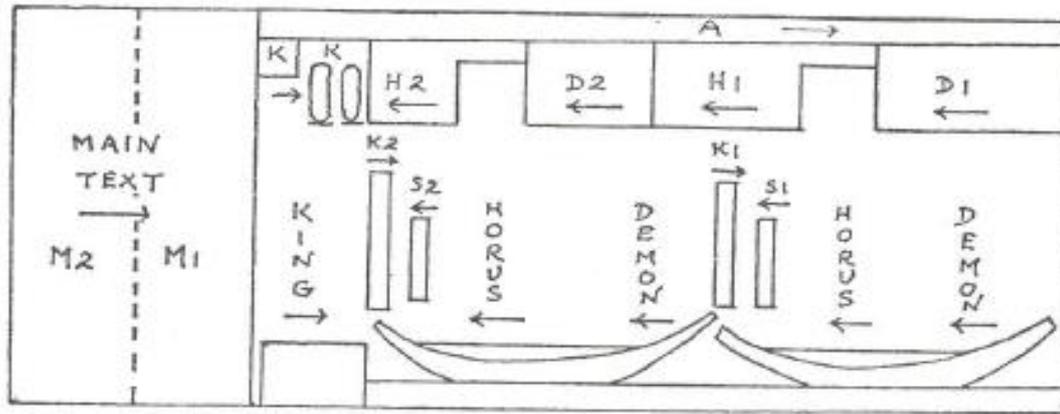


FIGURE 3 Lay-out diagram of a typical scene in Act I
 A Opening Speech of Chorus
 D1 Name and Speech of First Demon
 D2 Name and Speech of Second Demon
 H1 Name and Epithets of Horus Lord of Mesen
 H2 Name and Epithets of Horus the Behdetite
 K Cartouches and Epithets of King
 K1 King's Address to First Harpoon
 K2 King's Address to Second Harpoon
 M1, M2 Main Text, First and Second Sections
 S1, S2 First and Second Harpoons
 Arrows indicate direction in which figures and hieroglyphs face

Figure 4: The Prologue. A sketch of the scene. Scan sourced from: Fairman, H. W. (1974) 79.

The Triumph of Horus. An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama. London: Batsford.

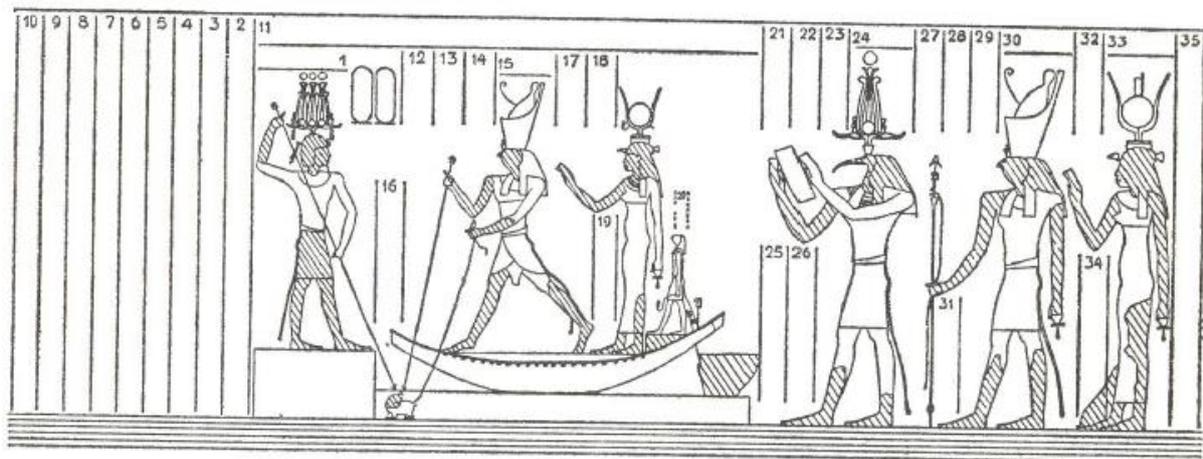


Figure 5: Act 1, various scenes. Scans sourced from: Fairman, H. W. (1974) 87, 90, 98. *The Triumph of Horus. An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama.* London: B. T. Batsford Ltd.

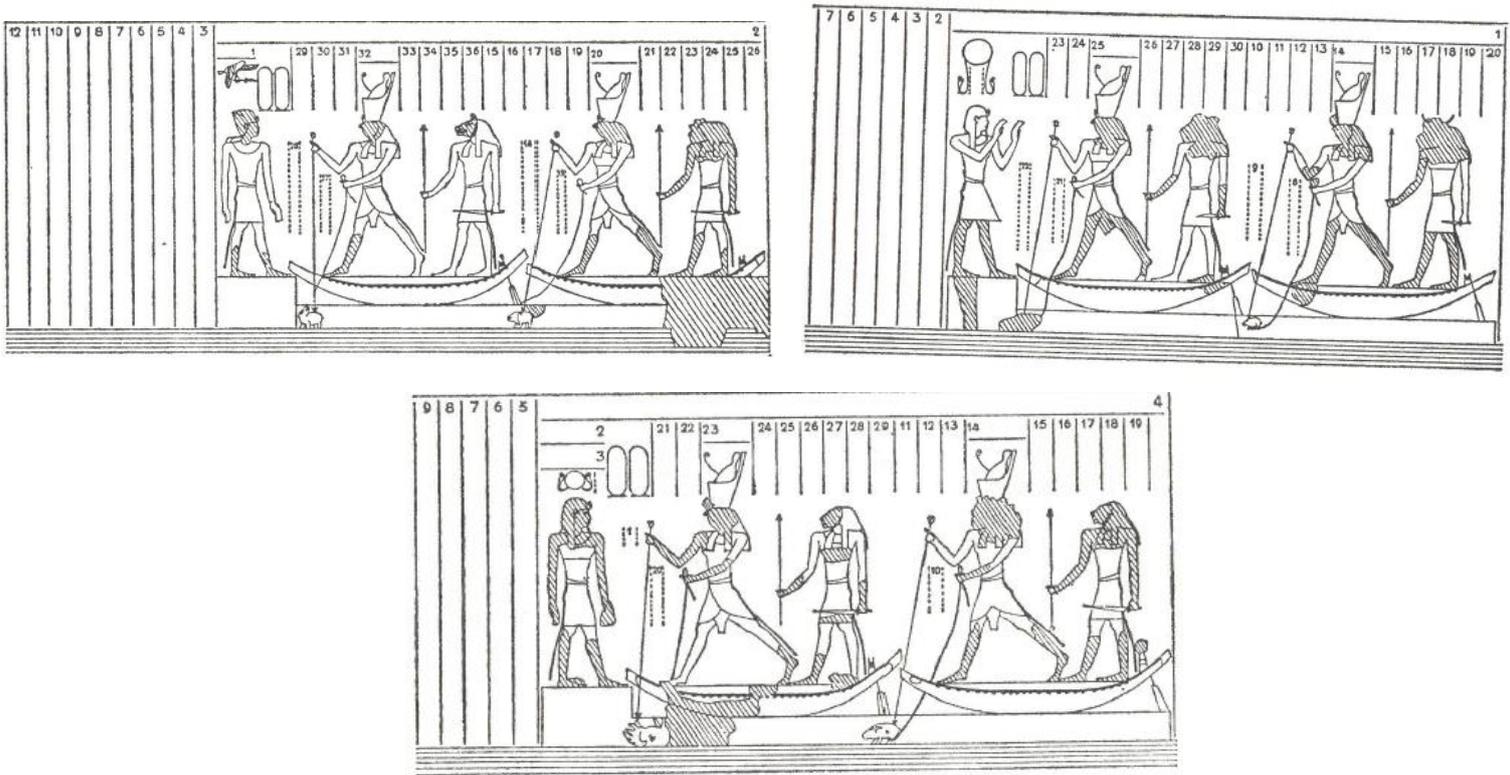


Figure 5: Sketches of scenes from Act 1. Scenes II, III, and V are shown to provide an overview.

Figure 6: Act 2, Scenes I & II. Scans sourced from: Fairman, H. W. (1974) 101, 105. *The Triumph of Horus. An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama.* London: B. T. Batsford Ltd.

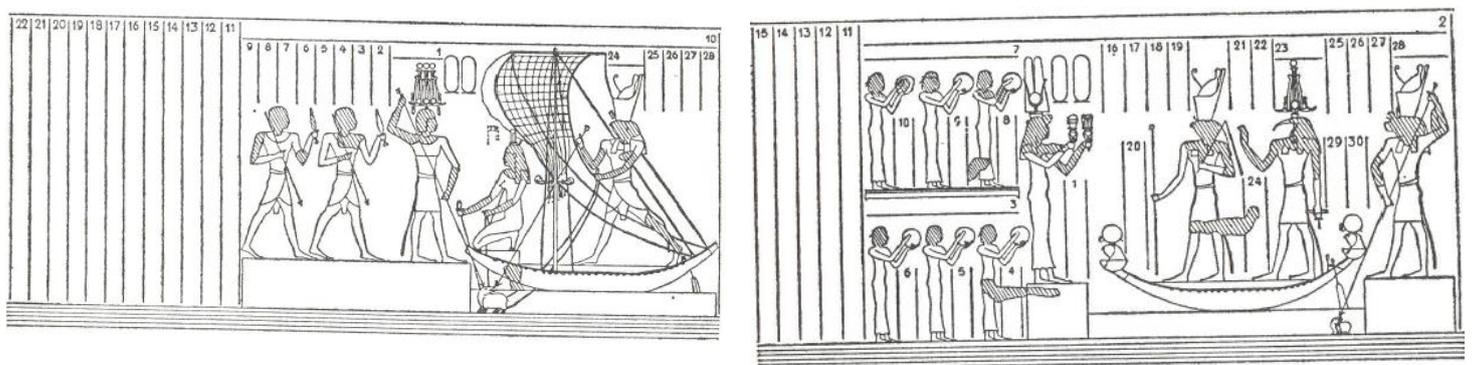


Figure 6: Left to right: Sketches of scenes I & II from Act 2.

Figure 7: Act 3, Scenes I, II & Interlude. Scans sourced from: Fairman, H. W. (1974) 109, 111, 113. *The Triumph of Horus. An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama*. London: B. T. Batsford Ltd.

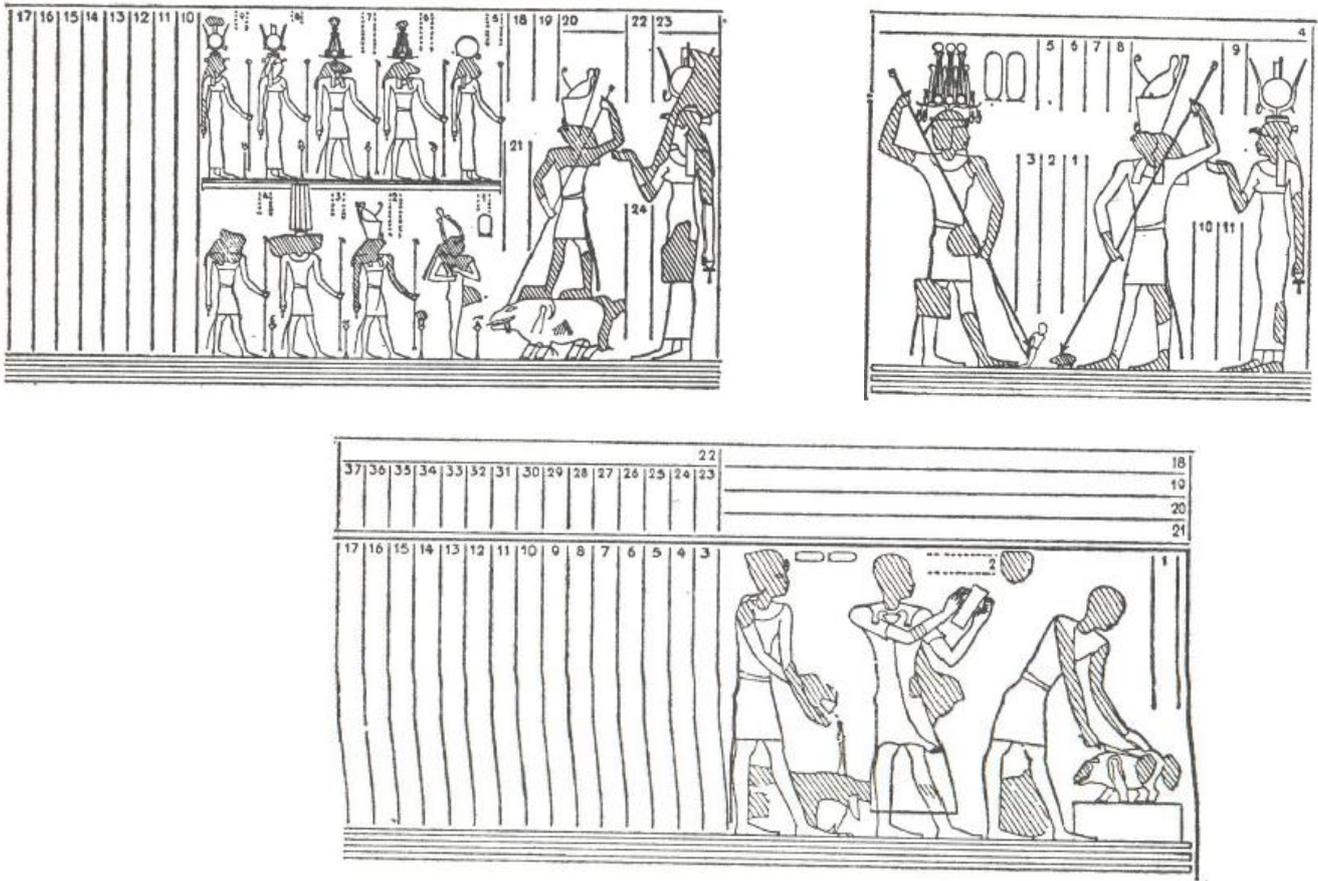


Figure 8: First Dynasty, King Udimu harpooning a hippopotamus and wrestling with it. Scan sourced from: Säve-Söderbergh, T. (1953) 16. *On Egyptian representations of hippopotamus hunting as a religious motive*. Lund: Gleerup.

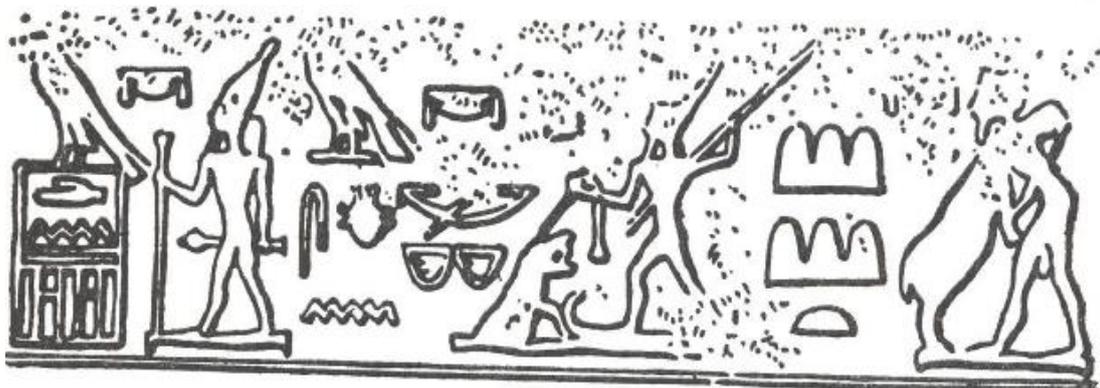


Figure 9: Act 2, Scene II. Scan sourced from: Fairman, H. W. (1974) 105. *The Triumph of Horus. An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama.* London: B. T. Batsford Ltd.

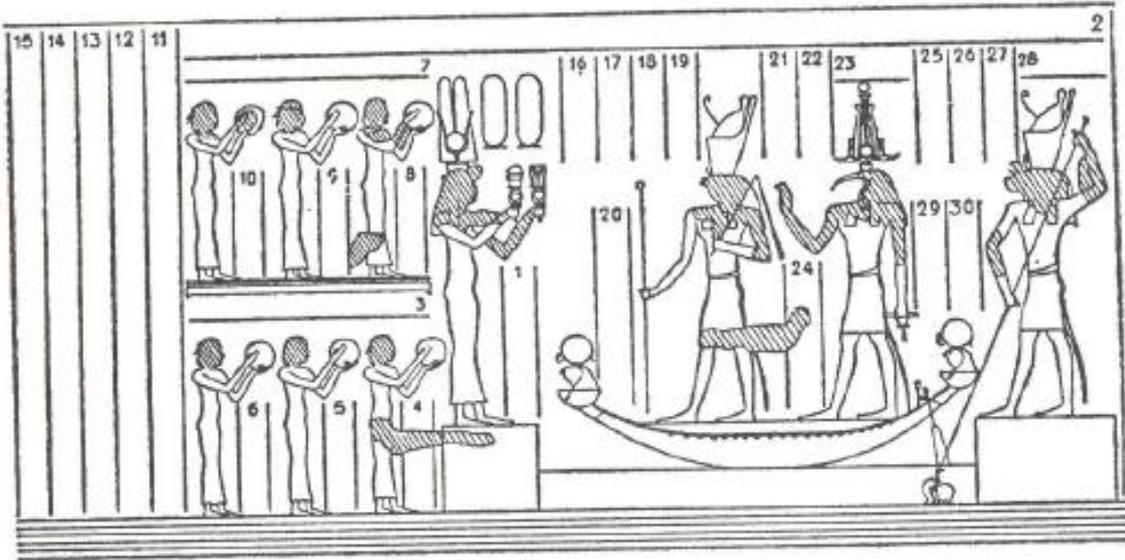


Figure 10: Prologue, with water clearly outlined. Scan sourced from: Kurth, D. (2004) 79. 'A World Order in Stone: The Late Temples', in R. Schulz and M. Seidel (eds.), *Egypt. The World of the Pharaohs*, 296–311. Königswinter: Könemann.



Figure 11: Sketch of the temple complex, with the location of the sacred lake marked. Scan sourced from: Fairman, H. W. (1974) 45. *The Triumph of Horus. An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama*. London: B. T. Batsford Ltd.

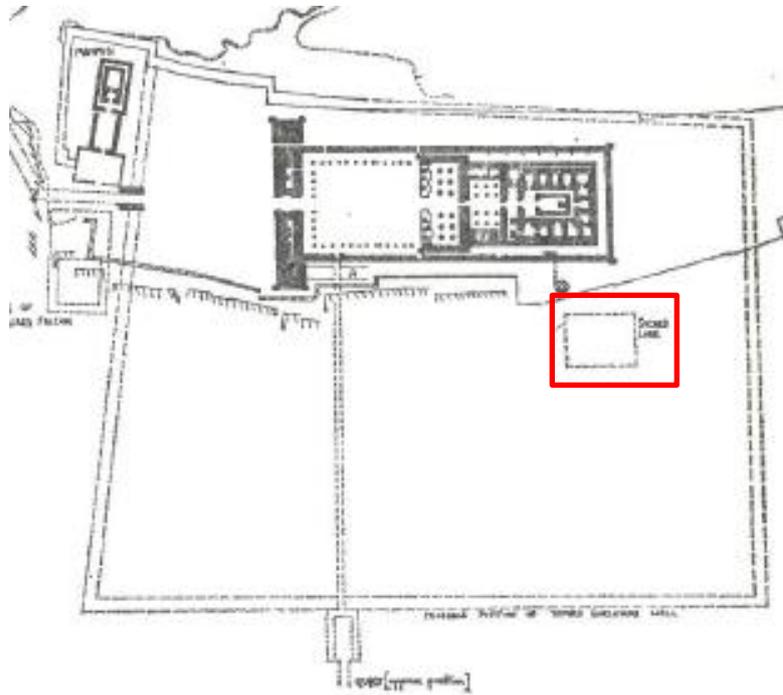


Figure 12: Act 3, Scene III, the second dismemberment of Seth. Scan sourced from: Fairman, H. W. (1974) *The Triumph of Horus. An Ancient Egyptian Sacred Drama*. London: B. T. Batsford Ltd.

