



## ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP-REVIEW

# “The Temple of Amun at Medinet Habu: Birth Place and Burial Place of the Primordial Deities” Lucia Gahlin

**Review of July 2022 Meeting  
by Margaret Lucy Patterson**

At the beginning of July 2022 Lucia Gahlin spoke to the [Essex Egyptology Group](#) about the Temple of Amun at Medinet Habu. She began by telling us that as our talk length is normally 90 minutes instead of 60 minutes she was going to be able to augment the lecture that she usually gives with even more information on the cult of Amun, which is so important for understanding the Small Temple. So the first half of the talk before our coffee & cake break was to be primarily about Amun and the second half would move on to the history of the temple itself in more detail.

But first Gahlin began with some orientation – even tho, as she said, most people in the room probably already knew the basics about where Medinet Habu is etc she still likes to make sure any newcomers are not left adrift. The area she was going to talk about is modern day Luxor, and Thebes is the name we generally use for the region in ancient times. That’s actually the Greek name, the ancient Egyptians called the place Waset. The temple Gahlin was focusing on for this talk is in Western Thebes, within the enclosure walls of Medinet Habu. Medinet Habu is the modern name of the place – Medina is town, so it is the town of Habu. It’s unclear what the origins of the word Habu are, but Gahlin noted that very near to Medinet Habu is the memorial temple of Amenhotep Son of Hapu – an 18th Dynasty non-royal individual who was deified after his death. So perhaps the modern Habu is derived from the ancient Hapu. Gahlin stressed that this is no direct evidence for this, but there are also no other particularly viable suggestions. The ancient Egyptian name for the region is *i3t t3mt* or *Iat Tjamet* (which morphed later into *Iat Djamet*). This means Mound of Tjamet (or Djamet).

The name, whether ancient or modern, takes in more than the temple of Ramesses III – but nowadays we mostly just think of that large temple. It’s the memorial temple for the king Ramesses III and was built c. 1180-1160 BCE, and at that point a mudbrick enclosure wall was built around the whole site including the earlier temple of Amun. This earlier temple sits on the Mound of Djamet (or Tjamet) and was later expanded beyond the mudbrick wall. It is dedicated to the cult of Amun, and also to the cult of kingship. Gahlin pointed out that the temple of Ramesses III is also dedicated to the cult of kingship, but in the Small Temple the focus is on the link between Amun and kingship. The Small Temple was more important to the ancient Egyptians than the grander looking memorial temple of Ramesses III – despite how modern tours concentrate on this larger structure and the reliefs about Ramesses III and the Sea Peoples and so on.

Having situated us geographically Gahlin now moved on to a brief outline of the history of the Small Temple (which she returned to in greater depth later in the talk). The core of the temple was built during the joint reign of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III, and then extended multiple times after this. There are also signs of earlier sanctuaries than this, perhaps dating back to as early as the 11th Dynasty (c. 2000 BCE) – which is around 850 years before Ramesses III put his temple on the site! The Small Temple is still being added to and developed up until 150 CE, and it is still in use until the 4th Century CE when Egypt converted to Christianity.

Gahlin said that it is clear that the Small Temple is the most important part of the site for the Ancient Egyptians. Ramesses III put his temple on the site because then it was in proximity to this temple of Amun. And the later God's Wives of Amun built their shrines here for the same reason – they want to be next to the temple of Amun, not the temple of Ramesses III.

Even after the 4th Century CE the site remains occupied. A church is built within the core of the temple and the architecture was altered to suit this new purpose. And a town grew up in the mudbrick enclosure wall – there had been a history of housing on the site from at least the 20th Dynasty, when there are records of people taking shelter within the enclosure walls from the Sea Peoples. From these beginning it grew into a place with complex multistory housing in the enclosure walls. This town was called Djeme in Coptic, a word derived from the older name of *Iat Djamet*. It was lived in until the 9th Century CE, at which point it was abandoned – it's not clear why this happened. So this was a very long lived site, and all of this was because of the presence of the Small Temple.

Gahlin said that all of that later archaeology was “cleared up” in the 19th Century CE (which seems a great shame to me, but sadly common). This work was done between 1859 and 1899 CE, under the direction of [François Auguste Ferdinand Mariette](#) & [Georges Émile Jules Daressy](#). The bulk of the work subsequently has been done by the Chicago Oriental Institute – who release all their publications for free. Gahlin referenced a few of these during the talk, in particular [The Excavation of Medinet Habu, Volume 2: The Temples of the Eighteenth Dynasty, Uvo Hölscher; 1939](#) and [Medinet Habu IX. The Eighteenth Dynasty Temple, Part I: The Inner Sanctuaries, The Epigraphic Survey; 2009](#). They have been work at the site since 1924, so have nearly completed a century of work on these monuments. The commission is to clear the site and to record the epigraphy – and they are working on all the monuments. The 1939 volume mentioned above includes the Small Temple as well as the nearby temples of Horemheb and Ay.

Having situated us in time and place Gahlin next moved on to discuss the Amun cult. The east and west banks of Thebes are both sacred to Amun, and there are connections between the temples of Amun on each bank. At this point Gahlin quoted from a book chapter by Martina Ullman (in [Sacred Space and Sacred Function in Ancient Thebes, Peter F. Dorman & Betsy M. Bryan eds.](#) which is another freely available Chicago OI publication) in which she says “[...] deliberately planned sacred areas emerged, related to each other by means of architecture and ritual, and which displayed their full function only in coexistence.”. These temples weren't just connected by happenstance or through coincidence of dedication, they were planned a cohesive ritual landscape spanning the whole of the area on both sides of the river.

Gahlin noted that it's actually quite unusual to dig into the myth of Amun, particularly in a talk like this. We normally think of the other Egyptian creation myths, but once we know what the Amun mythology is we can better appreciate the Small Temple once she moves to discussing it in more detail. Amun is the Hidden One, or the One Who Conceals Himself. He's often represented in an ithyphallic form (a male figure with an erect phallus). This iconography begins in the Middle Kingdom – there are examples on the White Chapel of Senwosret I at Karnak. In order to understand the myth of Amun Gahlin said we need first to learn about the Hermopolitan creation myth. The Egyptian name for

the town of Hermopolis is *Khemnu* which means “Eight Town”. The eight in this context are the Ogdoad who are a group of eight creator deities – Nun & Naunet, Heh & Hauhet, Kuk & Kauket, Amun & Amaunet. Each pair is a male and female pair. Each pair of deities has a different association – Nun & Naunet are water, Heh & Hauhet are infinity, Kuk & Kauket are darkness and Amun & Amaunet are hiddenness (or air in some tellings).

Only Amun and the Nun & Naunet pair are attested earlier than the Middle Kingdom, and the group of eight show up in the Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts. For all the name these are actually first seen in the First Intermediate Period. The coffin text which references them is CT76 in Faulkner’s numbering, and the three who predate this show up in the Pyramid Texts (301 & 446 but I’m not sure whose numbering scheme these are).

The eight gods of the Ogdoad are often shown with identical iconography to each other – all the male gods with frog heads and all the female gods with snake heads. They may also be shown as completely anthropomorphic (i.e. in human form). There are eight of them because four and eight are significant numbers in Egyptian thought, and they are both associated with totality. This makes them appropriate for these primordial deities from whom everything comes. And they are also referred to as the “fathers & mothers who made the light”, and the parents of the sun god Re.

So Amun is one of this group of eight gods going back to the Middle Kingdom. Karnak emerged as his main sanctuary in the Middle Kingdom as well, with the temple at Luxor linked to it. By the early 18th Dynasty there is a ritual network on both sides of the river including those two temples and the Small Temple at Medinet Habu. There are processions and festivals involving statues of the god Amun which are the glue that binds these establishments together as Ullman had said.

Gahlin told us that Amun is sometimes represented as a frog-headed deity in his iconography, like the rest of the male Ogdoad deities, but he is also represented as a fully anthropomorphic deity. From the reign of Tutankhamun onward he has blue skin, and before this he had red skin. He’s a celestial deity as well as a deity of kingship – his titles include the title of “lord of the Two Lands” just like the king. His feather headdress is full of symbolisms – Gahlin said that the two feathers represent duality, and the seven segments of the feathers are another symbol of totality as they are thought of as three plus four. In his representations at the Small Temple he’s shown as both this anthropomorphic deity with a two-feather headdress and as an ithyphallic deity – and the earliest depictions have red skin because this is before the reign of Tutankhamun.

By the 12th Dynasty Amun’s name incorporates Re as Amun-Re (for instance in the White Chapel of Senwosret II), and as far back as the reign of Intef II (who ruled as part of Dynasty 11 before Montuhotep II reunited the country) there are signs of a linkage between Re and Amun. The ithyphallic form is also linked to Min (a fertility deity). But Gahlin said that more importantly this iconography is linked to a form of Amun-Re called *Ka-mut-ef*, which means “bull of his mother” or “he who fashioned himself”. This form has black skin due to the associations between black (as in the colour of the soil of the Nile Valley) and fertility. The thinking behind this name & form of the god is that Amun is so virile that he impregnated his own mother. As well as fertility this links the deity strongly to kingship. Each king is the son of the previous king, and each king is seen as incarnation of eternal kingship. This means that the king becomes the bull of his mother – impregnating his wife so that she gives birth to the next incarnation of himself.

During the 18th Dynasty the Theban priesthood create a mythology that raises Amun to the pinnacle of the gods. Gahlin told us that in Papyrus Leiden I, 350 (dating to the 19th Dynasty) Amun is referred to as Amun the Great Honker. This form of Amun is a goose and his honking acts as the catalyst for creation. The sound waves produce the energy to create the primordial mound and thus the whole universe. Amun the goose might be male, but he is also sometimes said to lay the egg from which the universe hatches – sometimes

he also impregnates this egg as a ram-headed sphinx. This form of Amun is *Kem-at-ef*, and Gahlin stressed that one needs to listen carefully to these names – this is not the same as *Ka-mut-ef* despite the superficial similarity when spoken by a modern person. I have left in the hyphens separating the parts of each name because I think it makes the distinction clearer as you glance at it. The name *Kem-at-ef* means “he who has completed his moment”, i.e. finished the act of impregnating (or laying) the egg (or honking). In this particular version of the myth the Mound of Tjamet (or Djamet) is the actual real place where the world came into being – it’s also the place where the Ogdoad (including Amun) are buried after they have created the world.

After our coffee break Gahlin returned to this central idea of the Amun creation myth where Amun is completely his moment at Medinet Habu – fertilising the egg or laying it or honking! There’s an important festival when the cult statue of Amun is brought from Luxor to the Small Temple at Medinet Habu. During this festival Amun pays his respects to his ancestor *Kem-at-ef* and renews himself. This latter is also part of the rituals at Luxor – *Amun-em-Opet* (the form of Amun at Luxor) renews himself in the annual Opet festival. This is a very important festival in the Theban festival calendar, and this association makes the Small Temple very important as well.

During Hatshepsut’s reign there is an intellectual movement centred on Amun, and Gahlin sees Hatshepsut has having agency in determining this. As she had said before our coffee break there is an elevation of Amun to central importance during the 18th Dynasty – for instance in Papyrus Leiden I 350 there is a reference to Amun as “the father of fathers, the mother of mothers”. Amun is positioned, in this and other hymns with similar themes, as being the parent of the primeval gods. This is part of the evolution of Amun from being one of the primordial deities to being the god from whom all other gods come. And this is an important part of religious thought during Hatshepsut’s reign – the Small Temple as we know it today begins in her reign, and we see Amun as this red-skinned ithyphallic progenitor deity in the decoration that was completed in her reign. The more well known Deir el Bahri Divine Birth scene is a part of this theme as well, with Amun becoming overtly involved in creating the new king (Hatshepsut in this case). And it too has sound as a key component of creation – laughing in this case.

Gahlin now moved on to taking us through the architecture and art at the Small Temple. It is closed to visitors so hardly anyone has the chance to see it, so this was particularly interesting to see. The extant parts of the temple start from the time of the joint reign of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III (and Gahlin sees Hatshepsut as the primary king in this period). Prior to the inner core built by Hatshepsut there are signs of an earlier structure which were discovered in excavations as far back as the 1930s. This older temple is a small structure, about 8x7.2m long. Only the lowest courses of the sandstone blocks remain, but this is enough to help date the temple. The 12th Dynasty built with limestone (like the White Chapel of Senwosret I), so sandstone as a construction material suggests an earlier date. The only known parallels are built during the reigns of the Intefs in the 11th Dynasty before Montuhotep II re-united Egypt to start the Middle Kingdom. There are also parallels in the layout to surviving temples of Montuhotep II.



Plan of the Small Temple of Amun by Lepsius, public domain

Hatshepsut and Thutmose III use the same main axis as this earlier structure – and Gahlin pointed out that this is another example of Hatshepsut linking her own reign with that of Montuhotep II as she does at Deir el Bahri when she positions her mortuary temple next to that of Montuhotep II. The Hatshepsut/Thutmose III building has a court with 6 chapels at the rear – you can see them in the plan above. The chapels are accessed via a meandering path rather than straight through to the back on each access. The emphasis in the decoration of these chapels is on the ithyphallic form of Amun, and this is the form that is taken out from here in processions. Gahlin showed us an image from the decoration where we could see that unusually this statue is not carried around in a shrine – he is visible to the people (and in fact the priests are covered to complete the reversal of the normal situation). The non-ithyphallic version of Amun, who visits from over the river, is carried in procession within a shrine as is more usual for Egyptian deities ([David Falk's talk to the EEG in 2014 talked about the reasons behind the statues being carried in shrines](#)).

This early 18th Dynasty temple is a small stone temple within a mudbrick wall and quite a lot of the decoration remains. Some has been doctored in antiquity, and Gahlin returned to this later but first she took us through what the decoration tells us about what these 6 chapels were used for. The main axis of the 6 chapels enters into the front centre room, then proceeds to the back centre before turning right into the back right room (L, O and P on the plan above). This axis is concerned with the visiting non-ithyphallic form of Amun from Luxor, and the local ithyphallic version is venerated in the back left chamber of the temple. The rooms were named by Egyptologists based on the decoration and the finds from these rooms. The first central chamber is referred to as the Dyad Chamber – it has a skylight which illuminates a statue of Thutmose III and Amun (thus “dyad” because this is a pair statue). Gahlin said that this skylight was the only one in the original structure, the others that currently exist were added later (but still in antiquity). So this was a deliberate choice and intended to highlight this statue as the only lit area in an otherwise dark chamber. Through the door in the back of this chamber is the chamber at the centre back which is the Sanctuary of Amun (the non-ithyphallic form from Luxor), and through a door to the right is the Naos Chamber. This room contains a pink granite naos shrine, which is very large and was actually put into the chamber by removing the back wall and then rebuilding it! Gahlin said that we know this was the case because the team who disassembled the wall numbered the blocks so that they could put it back together properly. The shrine dates to the Late Period (hence needing to take a wall out rather than building a wall around it), but it is inscribed for Ptolemy IX who has usurped it from whichever king originally commissioned it. In this chamber both forms of Amun are depicted, both ithyphallic and non-ithyphallic.

The local ithyphallic form of Amun was venerated in a series of chambers that form a different axis for the temple. This axis started in the same place, at the Dyad Chamber, but then instead of continuing straight ahead you turn left into the vestibule before

turning right again and entering the chapel dedicated to the ithyphallic Amun. The final chamber of the six is not connected to this axis at all, it is the front right chamber and is entered directly from the courtyard. Gahlin told us that it is called the King's Sanctuary and the decorative scheme focuses on priests giving offerings to the Pharaoh – Thutmose III in this case.

Some time after Hatshepsut's death her images and names were removed from monuments, and the Small Temple is no exception. Gahlin showed us some examples of these, for instance in the Amun chamber her images are generally made into Thutmose I or Thutmose II (her father or her brother/husband). This removal of her from the record didn't happen immediately after her death, instead it happened towards the end of Thutmose III's sole reign (which lasted for nearly 30 years after Hatshepsut's death). There are also places in the temple where the whole image has been removed and then the scene reworked to hide the erasure. The examples Gahlin showed us included a place where the arm of Amun had been re-carved and was shown holding a *was* sceptre in the place where Hatshepsut had been standing. Another example had an offering table laden with offerings(!) where her image had been (and Gahlin point out on this one where parts of Hatshepsut's name remained because they referenced Amun so weren't erased). And another example she'd been replaced with an *ankh* with arms that was pouring libations over the god – because otherwise the libations would need removed when there was no longer a Hatshepsut to pour them. As Gahlin noted these are very creative alterations rather than just chiselling Hatshepsut out. The amount and wide placement of the altered images suggests that the decoration of all these chapels was finished in Hatshepsut's reign. Except perhaps for the King's Sanctuary, because that appears to have always depicted Thutmose III on his own.

This core of the temple that Gahlin took us through in such detail is the most significant portion of the temple and the most highly decorated. Following the death of Hatshepsut an extension was built during the reign of Thutmose III, and subsequent to this her image was removed from the decorative scheme as Gahlin had just discussed. And the temple functions from that time through to the end of the 4th Century CE, with some additions.

There are textual references dating to the time of Ramesses II which show how important the temple had become to the ritual landscape of Thebes. The texts detail a festival where Amun “shows himself in Opet at the beginning of every 10 day period”. This is the festival where the non-ithyphallic form of Amun comes across the Nile from Luxor in order to visit *Kem-at-ef* and offer libations to the Ogdoad – as Gahlin reminded us the mythological basis of the temple is that it was founded on the very mound that contains the burial place of the Ogdoad (called the mound of the fathers & mothers). So this is a festival where Amun visits his own burial place, and is re-born. And it happens every 10 days, thus is a significant part of the ritual calendar and links the Small Temple both conceptually and geographically to Luxor Temple.

During the Amarna Period the name of Amun is removed from monuments across Egypt, particularly at Luxor, and Gahlin told us that the Small Temple did not escape. This damage is then repaired during the post-Amarna return to orthodoxy, but none of the damage relating to Hatshepsut is repaired. This leads to an interesting wrinkle – in the Sanctuary of the ithyphallic Amun one of the images of Hatshepsut was re-worked into a lettuce. This vegetable has connotations of fertility in the Egyptian worldview and is thus linked to the ithyphallic Amun. The scene was therefore damaged during the Amarna Period, but subsequently not repaired – Gahlin suggested it was known to be originally Hatshepsut so was deemed unsuitable for repair.

Later kings also alter and extend the monument. Ramesses III didn't just build a very large temple next door to the Small Temple, he also added his cartouches to the 18th Dynasty structure. Later Pinudjem I (in the 21st Dynasty) did some restoration work. And in the 25th Dynasty Shabaku built a pylon at the front of the temple, and a small portico was added in the 26th Dynasty (which was usurped in the 30th Dynasty by Nectanebo I).

And in the 29th Dynasty more columns are added in order to prop up the 26th Dynasty ceiling. So by the end of the 30th Dynasty the temple is longer and is much closer to Ramesses III's enclosure wall.

The temple is clearly still very important even after the time it was originally built. From the Late Period onward there is evidence of Amun of Karnak visiting, and an annual festival takes place. This ritual re-enacts the funeral ceremonies of the Ogdoad and leads to the rebirth of the cosmos. Important people also choose to be buried in close proximity to the temple in the Third Intermediate Period and beyond. Of particular note is the burial of a High Priest of Amun during the 22nd Dynasty. And the God's Wives of Amun at the end of the Third Intermediate Period and into the Late Period are buried near the Small Temple – and have chapels of their own constructed near the temple. ([Dr Mariam Ayad's talk in May 2021 was on the subject of these God's Wives of Amun](#)).

Work is still being carried out at the temple as we move into the Ptolemaic Period. Gahlin told us that the remains of the sacred lake that are still visible date to this period (tho there may also have been an earlier lake which this one replaced). Ptolemy VIII built a splendid frontage for the temple, which gives it a grand entrance. And even after the Ptolemies are gone and the Romans are ruling Egypt there continues to be building work at the temple until 150 CE in the reign of Antoninus Pious (the successor to the Emperor Hadrian). The importance of the temple within the cultural life of Egypt is also indicated by the fact that Plutarch writes about the local form of Amun, *Kem-at-ef*, as Kheph and says that he is very important.

Gahlin concluded her talk by saying that while we tend to think about Amun in the context of Luxor and Karnak she hoped she'd show us how much more important the Small Temple at Medinet Habu was in the context of the worship of Amun and Egyptian culture in general.

And certainly, I think she succeeded in that aim! I particularly enjoyed the discussion of Amun's mythological role because Gahlin was right to say it is rarely presented in talks like these. I also appreciated the chance to see via photos and drawings the decoration of a temple I'm unlikely to see in person!

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## Related Links

The books from the Chicago Oriental Institute that Lucia Gahlin mentioned in the talk were:

- [The Excavation of Medinet Habu, Volume 2: The Temples of the Eighteenth Dynasty, Uvo Hölscher; 1939](#)
- [Medinet Habu IX. The Eighteenth Dynasty Temple, Part I: The Inner Sanctuaries, The Epigraphic Survey; 2009](#)
- [Sacred Space and Sacred Function in Ancient Thebes, Peter F. Dorman & Betsy M. Bryan eds.](#) (in particular she quoted from a chapter by Martina Ullman)

Lucia Gahlin has spoken to the EEG before:

- [She gave a talk on marriage in Ancient Egypt in 2013](#)

Write ups of other talks with linked subjects:

- [Dr Mariam Ayad's talk in May 2021 was on the subject of the God's Wives of Amun and discussed their shrines at Medinet Habu](#)
- [David Falk's talk to the EEG in 2014 included a discussion of the reasons behind the statues being carried in shrines](#)

- [Dylan Bickerstaffe's talk on the Egyptian harem in 2021 had a section on the harem conspiracy against Ramesses III which took place at Medinet Habu](#)
- [In 2013 George Hart talked about temples to Amun-Re, including a brief discussion of Amun's iconography.](#)