

## The Architectural Symbolism of the Mammisi-Chapels in Egypt

**I**N his comprehensive monograph on the mammisi (1) Professor F. Daumas has proved that this type of chapel developed from the sanctuary dedicated to the theogamy ritual into an independent structure set usually in front of the great temple and at right angles to it. The columned ambulatory which runs along the sides and rear of the chapel appears for the first time in the mammisi at Philae and dates perhaps from Ptolemy VI Philometor (2). It forms henceforth a consistent element embodied in the original design in the later mammisis at Edfu (Ptolemy VII-Evergetes II) (3), Armant (Cleopatra IV-Caesarion) (4), the Roman mammisi at Dendara (Nero) (5). At Kalabsha the structure presumed to be the mammisi has instead a portico in the courtyard because it abuts the cliff (6).

The typical mammisi consists of a rectangular cella fronted by a squarish « hall of offerings » flanked on one side by a small chapel and on the opposite side by a staircase (Edfu). At Dendara an intermediate « Broad Hall of the Ennead » (*wsh̄t p̄d̄t*) (7) or « Intermediate Broad Hall » (*wsh̄t h̄rt-ib*) separates the cella from the hall of offerings. A propylaea and a processional avenue form the approach. The structure has been called peripteral on account of the columned ambulatory whose columns are always connected by a wall higher than human

(1) François DAUMAS, *Les Mammisis des temples égyptiens*, Paris 1958.

(2) DAUMAS, *Mammisis*, p. 90. L. BORCHARDT, *Aegyptische Tempel mit Umging*, Cairo 1938, pls. 1-4.

(3) DAUMAS, *Mammisis*, p. 92. E. CHASSINAT, *Le Mammisi d'Edfou*, M.I.F.A.O., Le Caire 1911-1939.

(4) DAUMAS, *Mammisis*, p. 98. *Description de l'Égypte*, éd. Panckoucke, 1821, I, pp. 426 ff. J. F. CHAMPOLLION, *Lettres écrites d'Égypte et de Nubie*, Paris 1868, p. 85.

(5) François DAUMAS, *Les Mammisis de Dendara*, Paris 1959, pl. XXXIV.

(6) DAUMAS, *Mammisis*, p. 119, pl. Xb.

(7) DAUMAS, *Mammisis*, p. 109.

stature (1). This term, however, is objectionable since only the two lateral and the rear stretches of the ambulatory show the same uniform treatment (same width and spacing of columns) while, instead of the front one, there is a transverse vestibule wider than the ambulatory even to contain a central row of columns (Philae.) That the Egyptians themselves aimed at differentiating between the three-stretches recurring ambulatory and the front vestibule is implied in the separation of both by two doorways, one at either end of the ambulatory. On the other hand the type of the peripteral chapel is known in Egypt where a naos, usually open at both front and rear, is surrounded by a pillared ambulatory on four sides and set on a podium accessible from a front stairway (El Kab) or front and rear stairs (Karnak, Elephantine, Kuban) (2). Here the peripteros stretches the same width along the four sides and is not intercepted by any doorway, and between the pillars is a low balustrade. These peripteral chapels are not mammisi but pavilions used as stations for the processions of the sacred boat.

Could this three-stretches ambulatory which surrounds the sides and the rear of the typical mammisi imply any architectural symbolism? As our knowledge of the ritual performed in the temples increases the architectural symbolism expressed by the various elements of the structure gradually crystallizes into a coherent metaphysical system. Even the location of the text in the temple signifies a definite role in a consistent ritual (3). There is evidence, from both the inscriptions and the scenes in the mammisi, that its ambulatory is an architectural representation of the thicket of papyrus where Isis gave birth to Horus at Chemmis, near Buto, in the northernmost part of the marshy district of the Delta (modern Tell el Fara'in) (4).

*The Inscriptions.* — The ritual of the divine birth as performed in the mammisi is set into parallel to the myth of Isis at Chemmis. The most significant episode in relation with the architectural symbolism of the mammisi is that of the birth of Horus in the papyrus bush, hidden from Seth. Emphasis is laid upon this: «Until we have reached

(1) DAUMAS, *Mammisi*, pp. 93, 102.

(2) BORCHARDT, *Tempel*, Abb. 27, Bl. 20, 21.


(3) S. SAUNERON, *Quatre Campagnes à Esna*, Le Caire 1959, p. 117.

(4) A. KLASSENS, *A Magical Statue Base (Socle Behague) in the Museum of Antiquities at Leiden*, Leiden 1952, pp. 72-73.

the hidden place at Chemmis »<sup>(1)</sup>; « The bush is hidden »<sup>(2)</sup>; « The bush around the child that protects Horus at Buto »<sup>(3)</sup>. This is to delude Seth who endeavors to find out the child: « you have been the leader in tearing out the papyrus of those who hurried to Buto. You said your heart is burning to explore the bush »<sup>(4)</sup>. Sometimes the hidden place is called a « nest » since young Horus is a hawk: « The child who is in his nest »<sup>(5)</sup>, « nest of Chemmis »<sup>(6)</sup> a nest identified with the bush: « Are you warm in the nest, are you hot in the bush? »<sup>(7)</sup>. The picture evoked is borrowed from animal life in the Delta marshes and currently represented in the scenes on the walls of the mastaba-tombs from the Old Kingdom<sup>(8)</sup>. The young birds in the nests are dramatically protected by their parents fighting the predatory ichneumons. The transposition into the mythical setting is obvious: Horus (young bird), Isis (parent bird) and Seth (ichneumon). Once Isis sings « I was in a town without walls... I hid in the bush to conceal your son in order to avenge you »<sup>(9)</sup>. But « Seth does not penetrate into this nome, he does not go about at Chemmis »<sup>(10)</sup>, « his followers do not enter it »<sup>(11)</sup>.

The ritual inscribed on the walls of the mammisi provides exact parallels to the mythical episode at Chemmis: the king being « the


(1)  KLASENS, *Socle Behague*, pp. 18, 72: Metternich Stela 65.

(2)  KLASENS, *Socle Behague*, Op. 54, 24: Metternich Stela 185.

(3) E. CHASSINAT, *Le Temple d'Edfou*, VI, pp. 16, 14. KLASENS, *Socle Behague*, pp. 73, 88.

(4) KLASENS, *Socle Behague*, pp. 68, 88. Urk. VI, 135, 4-16.

(5) KLASENS, *Socle Behague*, p. 82; Pap. Med. London 14.8; Pap. Leiden I, 348, vs. 3, 5.

(6)  KLASENS, *Socle Behague*, pp. 54, 22: Metternich Stela 168.

(7) KLASENS, *Socle Behague*, pp. 82-83. A. ERMAN, *Zaubersprüche für Mutter und Kind*, 1901, Rt. 2,2 ff.

(8) P. MONTET, *Les Scènes de la vie privée dans les tombeaux égyptiens de l'Ancien Empire*, Strasbourg 1925, pl. I.

(9) KLASENS, *Socle Behague*, p. 83; Pap. Bremner Rhind. 7, 10.

(10) KLASENS, *Socle Behague*, p. 89: Metternich Stela 187.

(11) KLASENS, *Socle Behague*, p. 88.



From Dendara a text reads : « The hidden place of the goddess in the « sistrum house », since the enemies descended to the place, the Asiatic do not penetrate into it, the Bedwins do not enter it » (1).

*The Scenes.* — Corroboration of this interpretation is provided by a study of the scenes, especially the one which is in direct relation with the basic ideology of the mammisi and which represents the suckling of the new-born Horus by Isis within a papyrus thicket. It is significant that this scene recurs consistently in all the typical mammisi and in the same location, being reduplicated in the axis of the topmost register on the rear wall of the cella. At Dendara the mammisi of Nectanebo which exemplifies the uncompletely evolved mammisi and has no ambulatory the scene represents Horus standing and being suckled by Hathor seated on a throne (2). Later, at Philae, Isis is represented at a scale larger than that of the other personages, squatting on the ground, holding the infant to her breast and being assisted by the gods. The background features a screen of papyrus stems whose flowers form a horizontal cresting higher than the figures (Fig. A.) (3). At Edfu (4) the scene is carved on the internal face of the western architraves of the ambulatory, a very significant location indeed. It is twinned on either side of the central axis. Hathor is squatting, suckling the infant Horus at the center of a papyrus thicket whose stems fan out from her into a rounded outline (Fig. A, 1). On the rear external wall of the cella, opposite the architraves but at plinth level, another scene also twinned, forms the sequence and represents Isis seated on a throne and suckling the infant within a fanning papyrus thicket (Fig. A, 2) (5). A similar scene of the suckling occurs again on the south internal wall of the sanctuary (6) with the god Iwnw listening to the tympanum played by Anubis (Fig. A, 3). In the Roman mammisi at Dendara the scene (7) forms the uppermost central panel on the rear wall of the cella (Fig. B). Curiously enough it is a single representation set at the top of the

(1) A. MARIETTE, *Dendara*, III, 26 c. A.A.S. 18 (1880), 121. KLASENS, *Socle Behague*, p. 89.

(2) DAUMAS, *Mammisis de Dendara*, pl. III, p. 19.

(3) G. BÉNÉDITE, M.I.F.A.O., pls. XXIII-XXIV, pp. 59-61. G. MASPERO, *Egypt (Ais Una)*, p. 229. *Histoire Ancienne*, p. 155.

(4) CHASSINAT, *Mammisi d'Edfou*, pls. XLIII-XLIV.

(5) CHASSINAT, *Mammisi d'Edfou*, pls. XIX-XXI, p. 57.

(6) CHASSINAT, *Mammisi d'Edfou*, pl. XIII, p. 21.

(7) DAUMAS, *Mammisis de Dendara*, pl. XXXIX, frontispiece.

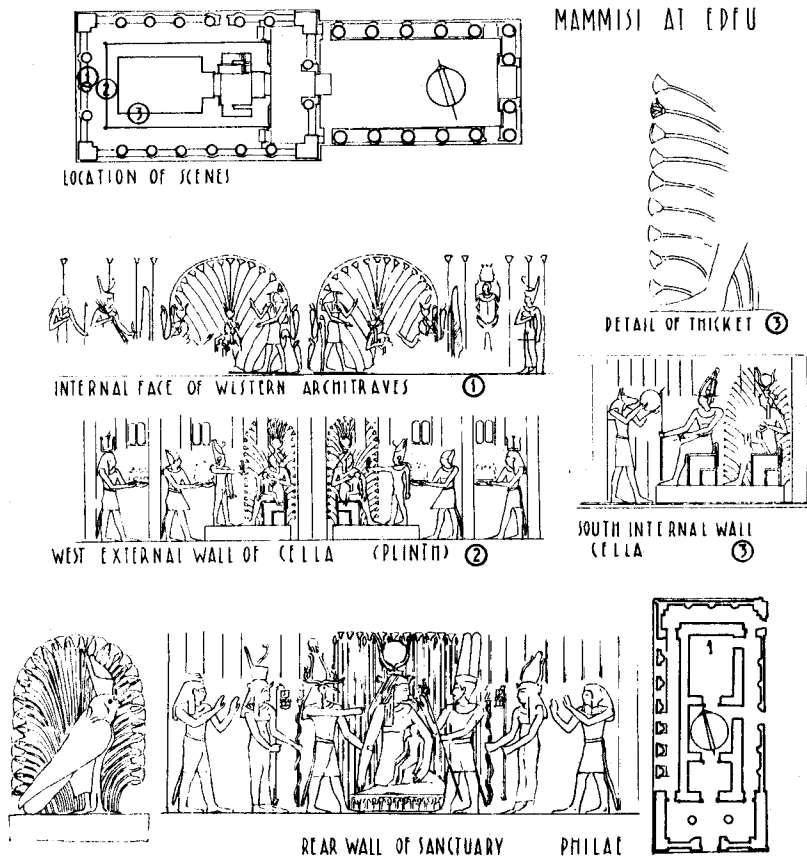


FIG. A

axial recess containing in high relief a Hathoric head, itself above a sistrum issuing from a naos which contains a standing figure (Fig. B, 1). The whole treatment surmounts the blocked doorway or niche against which abutted the naos (Fig. B, plan) (1). It has been deduced that this naos contained the statue of Hathor looking toward the door fronted by one of Ihy standing on the emblem of the union of Upper and Lower Egypt (2). This interpretation by Professor Daumas is corroborated by the inscriptions flanking the niche.

(1) DAUMAS, *Mammisis*, pp. 162 ff.

(2) DAUMAS, *Mammisis*, p. 108.

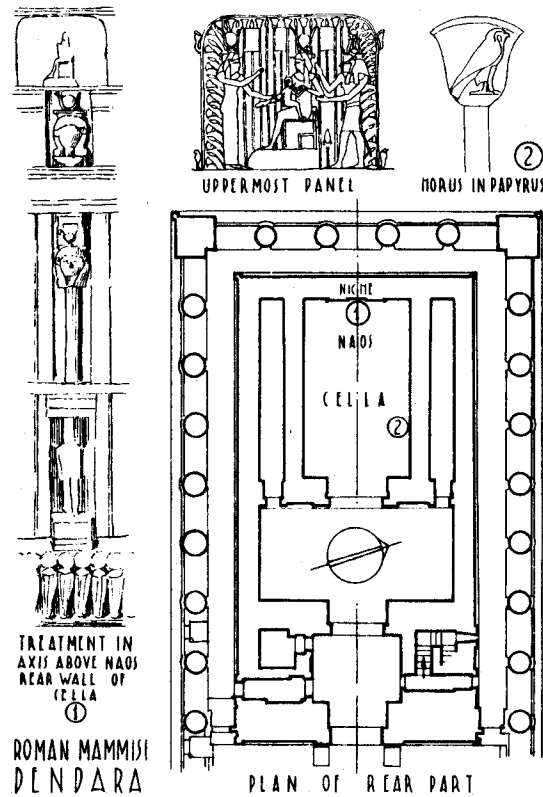


FIG. B

This consistent location of the suckling in the papyrus thicket in the uppermost register on the rear wall of the cella or even farther on the architrave of the ambulatory implies that the rearmost part of the mammisi, viz. the ambulatory, is to be connected with the subject of the scene. According to the Egyptian laws of graphical representation the uppermost register shows the farthest range of scenes. In this case the remoteness implied is in both space and time: the episode happened at Chemmis on the northernmost edge of the Delta in the prehistoric period and is the initial one in the myth of Horus. The curved outline and the fanning out of the stems from the suckling goddess and Horus aim at representing the « bush around the child » (Fig. C). The location of the scene in the rearmost plane of the cella,

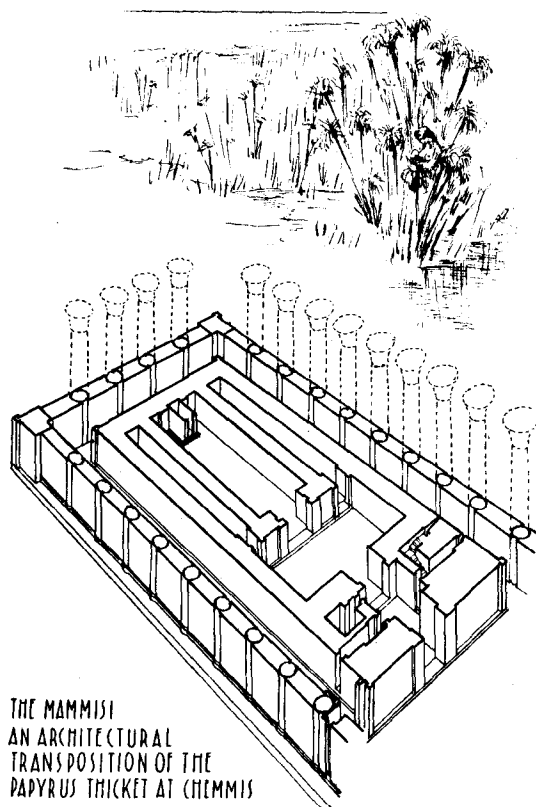


FIG. C

or once even in the ambulatory (Edfu), is a clear proof that the latter is the actual architectural transposition of the episode at Chemmis. This result had already been arrived at from a study of the related inscriptions.

About this basic symbolism several other secondary ones are implied by the elements and paraphernalia represented. A drastic stylization of the scene shows the hawk inside a papyrus flower as if in a pictogram (Fig. B, 2) on the north wall of the cella (fourth register) at Dendara (1). The accompanying text reads : « Said by Ḥor as he goes out of Buto : « Protect Ḥor at the time of hiding in the papyrus thicket ».

(1) DAUMAS, *Mammisis de Dendara*, pl. XLVI, p. 135.



 This

recalls another text : « Horus is born as a Falcon on the bush of Chemmis » (1). At Philae the hawk with the double crown stands in a fanning out thicket while a papyrus stem topped by a cobra Edjo (*W3djt*) is erected in front of him (Fig. D) : « He erects his form through his mother,

a statue of eternity »
  (2).

The pun on the name of Edjo and her two attributes *w3dnh* « Full of life in protecting his going forth as Re<sup>c</sup> » and *hrit w3d.s*. « The one above her papyrus, acting mother to the son of Osiris » is also paralleled in similar ones in various texts : « (Hathor) makes her son grow (*w3d.n.s*) as a sprout (*w3d*) of Chemmis » (3) and « ... the glittering one who gives life-stability to the infant (*w3h*) green (*w3d*) of life » (4). It has been suggested by Professor Daumas that the word « infant » (*w3d*) is to be related to that for « papyrus column » and to the verb « to be green, prosper » which implies an architectural transposition from etymological puns (5).

It remains to study the curious paraphernalia in the axis above the rear niche in the cella at Dendara. According to Professor Daumas' interpretation a naos stood in front of the niche and contained a statue of Hathor fronted by another of Ihy. Above, in a vertical recess and carved in high relief, are, from the bottom upward, a naos with a standing statue wearing the double crown(?), a sistrum and a head of Hathor. The uppermost panel in low relief already studied represents the single scene of Hathor suckling the infant in the papyrus thicket (Fig. B, 1) (6). Some help toward the interpretation is given in the two scenes in low relief flanking each of the three elements and their texts. To the north side of the naos of the god the scene represents Hathor suckling, Horus Behedity fronted by Ihy-Harsomtous on the unification emblem (*smj*) and Edjo (7). On the south side is a similar

(1) Pap. Louvre 3148, 7, 24. KLASENS, *Socle Behague*, p. 88.

(2) LEPSIUS, *Denkm.* IV, 36 b.

(3) DAUMAS, *Mammisis*, pp. 97-198 (Mammisi of Nectanebo).

(4) DAUMAS, *Mammisis*, p. 186 (Philae).

(5) DAUMAS, *Mammisis*, p. 136.

(6) DAUMAS, *Mammisis de Dendara*, pl. XXXIX.

(7) DAUMAS, *Mammisis de Dendara*, pp. 130-131.

scene with Isis suckling, Harsomtous, Ihy-Harpokrates and Nekhebet (1). The main purport of the two groups of texts is the untiring suckling process to rejuvenate the members (Hathor) of the infant Hor and causing him to live as monarch of the two lands (Isis). It is therefore safe enough to identify the now defaced god in the naos as the infant Horus, perhaps in his crib(?).

The scene on the north side of the sistrum (2) represents Isis on a dais protected by Ptaḥ fronted by Ihy-Harsomtous and Ma'eat. To its south (3) is Hathor protected by Horus Behedity and fronted by Ihy-Ihy and Ma'eat. The texts enhance the connotation of Hathor glittering with gold with her father Re<sup>c</sup> and of Isis with queenship, both helped by Marat in the Castle-of-the-Sistrum, while the young musician god Ihy tries to satisfy (*sh̄tp*) his mother by rattling his sistrum. The ideological implication of the sistrum and its connection with Hathor is not yet clear enough. Its name *sš̄.t* is certainly derived from that of the rattle of the papyrus *sš̄ w;ḏ* in the marshes, a derivation further corroborated by the shape of a papyrus stem given to the earliest sistrum known (Queen Teti, VIth Dynasty) (4). « Rattling the papyrus for Hathor » was a term from the ritual for the mother-goddess, originally represented as a cow in the Delta marshes. The inference may point to the prehistoric phase of the suckling at Chemmis where the rattling noise of the papyrus would have achieved more than an aesthetic satisfaction as a warning of the approach of Seth or to scare him off. Hence the invention of the sistrum as the characteristic musical instrument played for Hathor by her son, the musician Ihy, himself transposed from Ihy « the young calf of the cow » (5).

The third element at the top of the complex is a Hathor's head on the sign for « gold », flanked by two scenes in low relief representing Ihy facing Hathor and Horus, once protected by Nekhebet (north) and another time by Edjo (south) (6). The location of the two goddesses is inverted. They wish the young Ihy (alias the king) bright perspectives.

(1) DAUMAS, *Mammisis de Dendara*, pp. 109-110.

(2) DAUMAS, *Mammisis de Dendara*, pp. 133-134.

(3) DAUMAS, *Mammisis de Dendara*, pp. 112-113.

(4) A. HERMANN, *Altägyptische Liebesdichtung*, Wiesbaden, 1959, pp. 15-16, 18-19, fig. 2.

(5) HERMANN, *Liebesdichtung*, p. 19, n. 53.

(6) DAUMAS, *Mammisis de Dendara*, pp. 115-116, 136-137.

**PTOLEMÉE II**  
Ptolémée II.

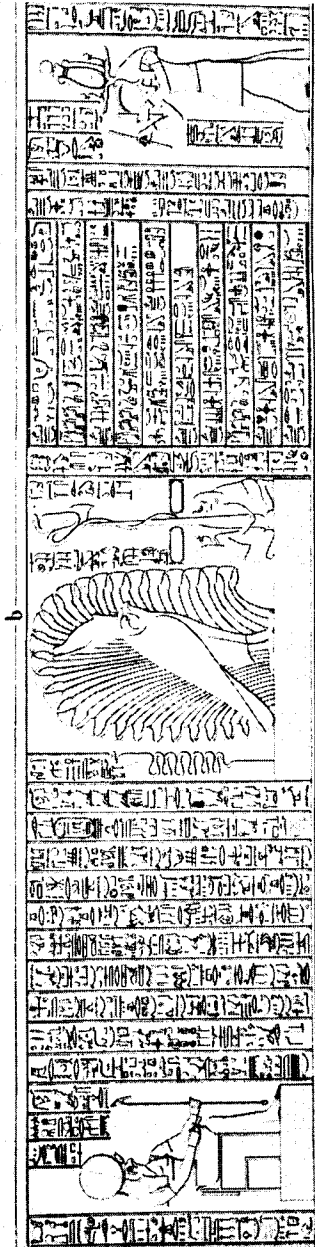


FIG. D  
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I would compare this composition to the scene at Philae where the falcon Horus in the thicket is fronted by a papyrus column topped with a serpent Edjo and backed by another. These three elements are here paralleled by Horus, the sistrum and Hathor's head.

The last point to investigate deals with the location of the scenes in connotation with the orientation of the mammisi. It is a well known fact that the location of the various elements of a monument, whether they be architectural or graphical, follow a certain discipline whereby they are connected to the south or the north lands (1). This subtle arrangement can be noticed for the scenes on the rear wall of the cella at Roman Dendara where Nekhebet stands south of the central axis and Edjo north of it, while Hathor in the thicket in the upper panel faces south. As a rule the scene of the suckling in the thicket is carved on the rear wall of the cella, which, however, assumes various cosmic orientations. If we refer to the local orientation, in terms of the flow of the Nile at a given point, we find out the following results :

Dendara (Nectanebo and Roman)	rear of cella	is northernmost
Edfu	» » » »	southernmost
Kom Ombo	» » » »	northernmost
Philae	» » » »	northernmost

The mammisi at Philae, as laid out independently from the main temple, would suffice to corroborate the presumption that a « local orientation » of the rear of the cella toward the north was essential. The purpose of this orientation was to locate the scene of the suckling Hathor in the thicket at the northernmost end, even beyond the cella as at Philae, thus identifying the rear part of the mammisi with Chemmis located at the northernmost edge of the Delta.

*Conclusion.* — It has been shown that the typical mammisi about the time of Ptolemy VI is characterized by a columned ambulatory recurving in three stretches around the sides and rear of the cella but intentionally separated from the front columned vestibule by two doorways. This unique arrangement is the architectural transposition of the papyrus thicket where, according to a prehistoric tradition, Hathor hid from Seth and suckled her infant Horus. The structure is pregnant with architectural symbolism in its design (ambulatory : papyrus thicket), orientation (scene of thicket : northernmost), basic elements (papyrus columns : *wjḏ* punning on « green, young, infant »)

(1) SAUNERON, *Esna*, I, pp. 64-65, 72.

and its paraphernalia (statue of Horus-sistrum — head of Hathor at Roman Dendara.)

The elements are not exclusive to the mammisi and they do occur in other structures. The papyrus columns are described in Egyptian texts as forming a « papyrus marsh » or « papyrus thicket » or « Chemmis thicket » (Esna) (1). The scene of Hathor suckling Horus in a fanning-out thicket of papyrus is found engraved on bronze bowls of Phoenician workmanship and deposited as funerary furniture in Etruscan tombs (Bernardini tomb at Palestrina, VIIth B.C.) (2). The sistrum is a common musical instrument and the invention of the Hathoric column which imitates it goes back to the Middle Kingdom. In the mammisi these various elements are composed into a coherent architectural whole with representational, cosmic and etymological symbolism.

It provides on a monumental scale and worked in « good stone of eternity » the architectural transposition of the papyrus thicket at Chemmis to enable the infant king to relive the destiny of Horus suckled by Hathor (Isis) and raised to become King of Upper and Lower Egypt. The added ambulatory provides also more space for the play of the actors during the mystery performance (3).

This would be another example of the many types of symbolisms imitating cosmogonic or geographic elements : the pylon of the temple (the two mountains of sunrise), the hypostyle hall (papyrus marsh), the ceiling of the hypostyle hall (sky), the mastaba superstructure (primeval mound), the pyramid (sunrays to ascend to heaven), the Cenotaph of Seti (primeval mound surrounded by the Nun), the sacred lake (Nun), the funeral quay in the mortuary temple (the sedge fields) (4).

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(1) SAUNERON, *Esna*, I, pp. 62, 63, 69, 71.

(2) H. FRANKFORT, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, Baltimore, 1954, p. 199, fig. 97.

(3) Communication by Professor F. Daumas.

(4) I am indebted to Professor F. Daumas for his help with references and other suggestions.