THE ROLE OF AMUN

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Inscriptions in Hatshepsut’s mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri describe her conception as resulting from the union of her mother, Queen Ahmose, with the god Amun-Re, “[in] the incarnation [of] her husband, the Dual King Aakheperkare (Thutmoses I),” and record the god’s decree that Hatshepsut “will exercise the function of kingship in this entire land. . . . rule the Two (Egypt) and lead all the living.” Acknowledged here as the source of Hatshepsut’s existence and her kingship, Amun-Re was the amalgamation of two gods, Amun and Re, in a single deity. In Hatshepsut’s time, this fusion of the two divinities was the dominant theology of Egypt, with religious as well as political implications. The god Re, whose name means “sun,” was worshiped from the beginning of Egyptian civilization as the supreme force in the world. His chief center of worship was at Heliopolis (part of modern Cairo), just to the north of Memphis, the political capital for most of Egypt’s history. Recognizing that the world’s very existence depends on the sun, the Egyptians saw in Re not merely one phenomenon of nature but the governing force from which all natural phenomena derive. As such, Re was acknowledged as king of the world. In their role as rulers of the living—and thus, in Egyptian eyes, as the supreme human power—Egypt’s kings saw both their own existence and their kingship as devolving directly from Re. This descent was reflected in the title Son of Re, which Egypt’s kings had used since the Fourth Dynasty, more than a millennium before Hatshepsut’s time. Hatshepsut adopted the title as well, though in her case it was occasionally changed to Daughter of Re, reflecting her gender.

In the theology of the New Kingdom, the role of the god Amun was that of the creator of the world. In that capacity, he was thought to have existed before all else, independent of his creation. As such, Amun was unlike Re and the other Egyptian gods, who represented the elements and forces of nature. The true extent of his being could not be discerned in these phenomena—a quality reflected in his name, which means “hidden.” Nonetheless, the Egyptians felt Amun’s presence in their daily lives. Since the world in its entirety had been created by him, its elements and forces could be seen not only as gods in their own right but also as reflections of Amun himself. The god Amun-Re represented the primary expression of this theology: Amun’s creative force manifest in the sun. Re’s life-giving power and authority were honored in their own right, but Amun was recognized as their ultimate source. As such, Amun-Re was “King of the Gods” and “Lord of the Two Lands’ Thrones.”

Amun had first risen to prominence in the Eleventh Dynasty at Thebes, his primary center of worship from that time onward. His role in the Egyptian pantheon was closely linked to the patronage of Egypt’s rulers of the Middle and New Kingdoms (Eleventh–Twelfth Dynasties and Seventeenth–Eighteenth Dynasties, respectively), both of which had originated at Thebes. These kings saw Amun not merely as the god of their hometown but as the source of their dynastic legitimacy. Even when they no longer resided at Thebes, they were either crowned there or, if the ceremony was held elsewhere, evidently felt the need to pay homage in Amun’s Theban temple immediately after their coronation.

The god’s primary temple in Thebes was on the east bank of the Nile, at Karnak. Called “Of (all) places, the one that has been appointed,” it was oriented perpendicularly to the Nile, with its sanctuary in the east. In Egyptian eyes, temples were homes of the gods. Karnak served as Amun’s state temple: like the king’s palace, it was his chief residence and site of contact with his subjects. The god also had a second Theban temple, at Luxor, two miles south of Karnak, built parallel to the Nile. This was known as Amun’s Southern Residence and was viewed as the god’s private enclave. On the west bank, the royal mortuary temples were also dedicated to Amun and belonged to Amun’s Estate, which included all the Theban temples. The mortuary temple of Hatshepsut in the desert valley of Deir el-Bahri was built to face Karnak, and the valley itself was part of the region known as Facing Its Lord.

During annual festivals the god’s image was taken in procession from Karnak to the other Theban temples: to Luxor on the Beautiful Festival of the Residence, and to the mortuary temples on the west bank during the Beautiful Festival of the Valley. During the early Eighteenth Dynasty, these two celebrations were
Hatshepsut’s reign also witnessed the beginning of an intellectual movement centered on the god Amun-Re. This is manifested primarily in nonroyal texts, particularly in hymns to the sun carved on stelae and in the tombs of Hatshepsut’s officials. Such hymns were traditionally devoted to the sun as Re, Khepri (the sun at dawn), Atum (the sun at sunset), or Harakhti (the sun as ruler of the world). Under Hatshepsut, however, they began to be dedicated to Amun as well, as in this hymn inscribed on a statue of one of her contemporaries:

Scribe Amenhotep says:
Oh, my lord and the gods’ lord, Amun, Lord of the Two Lands’ Thrones, Re-Harakhti, eldest god, who made what has been made, unique, without equal, perfect in sunlight, glittering in kindness, sunlike one, lord of appearance, for you are air for noses and one breathes only as you allow!
I have come unto you that I may worship your perfection from the time when you appear in the east of the sky until the sun sets in the western mountain.
May you let me be in the following of your life force, my mouth full of the sustenance that comes from your offering stand.
(Dedicated) by the scribe and steward of the high priest (of Amun), Amenhotep.

Such hymns represent not the incursion of Amun into the solar cult but an expanded view of the sun as a manifestation of Amun: as in this text, Amun and the sun god are addressed as a single being. The texts do not generally occur on the monuments of kings: their counterpart in the royal sphere is the solar chapels that Hatshepsut established both in Karnak and in her own mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri.

These texts introduced into worship of the sun as a natural phenomenon aspects derived from the more abstract theology of Amun: his status as the primordial creator, his accessibility as a personal god, and his role as arbiter of ethical values. They also stressed the primacy of Amun over other gods, a concept that eventually led to what Jan Assmann has called the “crisis of polytheism”: the view that all the gods could be understood not only as independent entities but also, and ultimately, as manifestations of a single god, Amun. This view did not reach its most profound expression until the Nineteenth Dynasty, during the reign of Ramesses II (r. 1279-1213 B.C.), but its beginnings can be traced to Hatshepsut’s time.

Hundreds of years before Hatshepsut, a similar view of divinity had been expressed in the Middle Kingdom composition known as the Instruction for King Merikare:
People, the flock of the god, are provided for.

He has made the sky and the earth for their heart . . .

He has made the heart’s air so that they may live
when they breathe.

They are his likenesses, who came from his body.

He rises in the sky for their hearts.

He has made for them the plants, flocks, and fish
that feed them . . .

He makes sunlight for their hearts and sails
(across the sky) to see them.

He has raised a shrine about them: when they weep
he is hearing . . .

The god knows every name.8

The deity in this text is anonymous—though clearly envisioned,
at least in part, as the sun—and it is not known how widespread
such sentiments were in the Middle Kingdom. By the time of
Hatshepsut, however, this personal view of divinity had gained
general currency and had become centered on the god Amun.

From royal monuments to private statues, the different manifesta-
tions of Amun’s cult in the early Eighteenth Dynasty can be
traced to this sense of a single, approachable god behind all the
phenomena of nature and human events.

Imagine you are writing an extended response on Hatshepsut’s religious policy. Somewhere in the response you will include a paragraph about how the fusion of Amun and Re into Amun-Re was strengthened during the reign of Hatshepsut. It will not be the most important paragraph in your response, but will be a key indicator that you have a deeper knowledge of the topic than other students. Write that paragraph.

Topic sentence:

Explanation:

Reference to Allen (secondary source) and a primary source (hymns to Amun).