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Egyptian Gardens

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The gardens of ancient Egypt were an integral component of their religion and surroundings. The gardens cannot be excavated like buildings and tombs can be, but archeological relics remain that have helped determine their construction, function, and symbolism. Along with these excavation reports, representations of gardens and plants in painting and text are available (fig. 1).1 These portrayals were frequently located on tomb and temple walls. Assuming these representations were based on reality, the gardens must have truly been spectacular. Since the evidence of gardens on excavation sites often matches wall paintings, scholars are able to learn a lot about their purpose.2 Unfortunately, despite these resources, it is still difficult to wholly understand the arrangement and significance of the gardens.

In 1947, Marie-Louise Buhl published important research on the symbolism of local vegetation. She drew conclusions about tree cults and the specific deity that each plant or tree represented. In 1994 Alix Wilkinson published an article on the symbolism and formation of the gardens, and in 1998 published a book on the same subject. He has completed the most

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extensive research on the formal aspects of the gardens and has assembled the most comprehensive resource to date regarding their layout and symbolism. In 1994, Egyptologist C. J. Eyre contributed archeological explanations of the use of the gardens. In 1989, Salima Ikram extensively explored the gardens and garden shrines of Amarna with Barry J. Kemp, who is still currently the head of Amarna excavations. In 1989, with a revision in 2003, Lise Manniche investigated all of the plants and herbs used by the Egyptians and their significance. All of these scholars have supplied important conclusions about the layout, plants used, and functions of the gardens.

Although these considerable contributions to the history of the garden in ancient Egypt have been made, important questions about the evolution of the gardens have yet to be asked. Like all elements of ancient Egyptian society, the gardens were full of religious symbolism. The orientation of the garden and the plants in it denoted particular deities and sacred ideas. Based on the information gathered this far on the sites, it is clear that there was not a great deal of change in the gardens from the Pre-dynastic to the Ptolemaic period. This is not unexpected, considering the consistency of Egyptian religion. However, it is noteworthy to recognize that they not change during the revolutionary Amarna Period. If the gardens held religious symbolism and the plants represented specific deities, why did Akhenaten not change the gardens at Amarna despite transforming the artwork?

I will demonstrate that, while the gardens developed their significance in the Old Kingdom, by the Amarna period the established symbolism of the gardens had become tradition rather than a place where holiness was acknowledged through the recognition of symbols. I will trace the progression of the gardens from the Pre-dynastic to the Ptolemaic periods and analyze the changes in the developments. I intend to show that specific plants and garden formations that were used in the Old Kingdom as symbols and manifestations of deity continued through the Amarna period. This reveals that while Akhenaten performed an extreme renovation of the established religion and manifested this through the use of art, he did not apply the same transformations to the gardens. I will argue that during the Old Kingdom the gardens represented deity, but as the First Intermediate Period gave way to the Middle Kingdom, the significance began to turn toward a tradition and displayed the pharaoh’s power on a secular level rather than sacred. By the time of Akhenaten’s revolution, it had transformed into a tradition, as he did not attempt to change the gardens, despite his theological reforms.

There is confirmation of formal gardens existing as early as the Fourth Dynasty. Old Kingdom sites that have evidence of gardens are more difficult to come by; nevertheless, there is evidence that all of the basic forms and ideas concerning the gardens were established at this point. The most detailed

information about the plants in the gardens comes from the analysis of roots, seeds, pollen, and carbonized and decayed remains found at the excavations. In addition, there are descriptions of the gardens being planted and pools being dug on the Palermo Stone.4

Much of the literature describing the use and significance of the plants comes from the Old Kingdom texts like the Book of the Dead and the Pyramid Texts. There is more physical evidence of temple gardens in the New Kingdom, especially at Amarna, due to its desertion after the death of Akhenaten. The city’s buildings and gardens avoided the typical remodeling that many sites underwent. Fortunately, Old Kingdom texts provide a good representation of the gardens and, more importantly, match many excavation sites and wall paintings. Along with their religious symbolism, the gardens provided food, fuel from the wood, and perfume from the flowers to anoint the statues that occupied the temples. They also contributed to the architecture in the environment of the garden area, and vegetation played an important role in magic and medicine.5 These important uses are made clear in the available texts.

The temple gardens were a fundamental part of the temple complexes, whether it was cult or funerary. They were considered an element of the cosmos that the temples represented. The design of the gardens constantly included water, which was symbolic of the primordial waters of creation (fig. 2). These waters were the manifestation of the god Nun and quite often there was an island located in the center of the body of water to symbolize the initial moments of creation. The body of water followed the east-west orientation of the temple and was rectangular or t-shaped, in the center of the garden.6

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Excavations have included evidence of twin trees, groves, and pools. There are indications of terracing from Old Kingdom to Ptolemaic times, and most gardens appear to have been walled. The landscape of the gardens reflected the mental image the ancient Egyptians had of how the world was created and sustained through different gods and goddesses. They resembled theatres that portrayed the ongoing cycles of existence. It was essential to the Egyptians’ beliefs to surround themselves with these reminders. The gardens were symmetrical and axially planned—a reflection of the symmetry used in their artwork. However, the stage-like representations of creation were contrasted with the static, conceptual style of the painting and sculpture being produced.

Before the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, formal gardens were more popular in Upper Egypt. This may be attributed to economic factors that produced more leisure time for Upper Egypt. The Old Kingdom set the foundation for the configuration of the gardens, as well as beliefs and practices that extended to the Ptolemaic period. In the Old Kingdom texts, the sacred roles of the plants are described and established. The divinities, which the plants represented, were anthropomorphized in the plants themselves. This is also practical as the canons of art were established in this period as well.

The gods and goddesses that the trees and plants represented are as follows: The date palm symbolized Re and Min. The lettuce plant was also the embodiment of Min. The doum palm represented Thoth. The tamarisk, or willow tree, represented Osiris. Water lily and papyrus symbolized Horus and Hathor. The sycamore tree symbolized Isis and eventually Hathor, after the assimilation of Isis to Hathor. This tree is one of the most important and most oft-described plants in texts and images. Hathor has also proven to be an important deity in relation to the gardens and her sycamore tree. In text and images, she is frequently shown living in the tree and providing aid to those who seek it.

It is at times difficult to associate descriptions of the lotus flower and papyrus in the texts to sacred gardens, because they tend to have a stronger association with the life-giving Nile. Furthermore, the trees and shrubbery depicted in painting and sculpture tend to be portrayed in a uniform manner, suggesting a garden, and often lack the two plants. It is thus more convincing to concentrate on Old Kingdom texts that describe trees and other plants in order to demonstrate the symbolism of this time period’s garden. However, papyrus and lotus flowers were grown in many of the ponds and lakes at the temples to represent Hathor and Horus and add beauty to the gardens.

The Hathor cults at Memphis called her the “Mistress of the Southern Sycamore.”\textsuperscript{11} In the Book of the Dead, Spell 59 depicts Ani kneeling beside a pool and receiving food and water from the goddess in the sycamore tree, who is Hathor (fig. 3). The spell states:

O you sycamore of the sky, may there be given to me the air which is in it, for I am he who sought out that throne in the middle of Wenu and I have guarded this egg of the Great Cackler. If it grows, I will grow; if it lives, I will live; if it breathes, I will breathe the air.\textsuperscript{12}

The pool, usually referred to as a lake, was surrounded by trees and flowers and was the central feature in temple gardens.\textsuperscript{13} Due to the fact that ponds were not natural to the environment and the sites show them as usually rectangular or t-shaped, it is logical to assume that a pond mentioned in a text indicates the event is taking place in a garden.\textsuperscript{14}

Sycamore trees were commonly planted in temple gardens at the eastern entrance. Spell 109 is a spell for “knowing the souls of easterners,” and it states:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Buhl, “The Goddesses of the Egyptian Tree Cult,” 86.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Wilkinson, \textit{The Garden in Ancient Egypt}, 125.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Temple lakes and ponds were sometimes very large. The lake in the Maru Aten at Amarna was 120 m. by 60 m. and at Karnak it was 132 m. by 80 m. At Dendera the lake was only 33 m. by 28 m. They were also often terraced so they could be reached when the water was low. See Wilkinson, \textit{The Garden in Ancient Egypt}, 8.
\end{itemize}
“I know those two trees of turquoise between which Re goes forth.”15 The Book of the Dead also contains other images and descriptions of trees. A depiction of Spell 117 portrays Anubis leading Nakht toward a false door entrance to the other world.16 Before them stands another tree, similar to the tree in Spell 91 which depicts Nakht walking toward a tomb chapel with his soul flying before him.17 Both spells are leading Nakht to the place where Re, Hathor, and Osiris dwell. They all have a sycamore tree before them. Spell 63a is meant to assist in drinking water in the realm of the dead, and not being burned by fire. The depiction of the spell shows a pond with a sycamore tree. It is presumably Hathor, goddess of the Sycamore, in the tree. She is offering food to Nakht and pouring water over him to prevent burning.18 The pool and the tree also suggest a garden setting.

Mary-Louise Buhl has researched the significance of plants in other Old Kingdom texts in relation to the gods and goddesses they represented. Located in Heliopolis, there was a shrine for the female counterpart of the sun god, Atum, named Saosis. Here the sacred acacia was worshipped. The acacia tree is also described as sacred to Horus in the Pyramid Texts. In text 436a-b, it reads, “Where is Horus who comes forth from the acacia to whom it was commanded.”19 In the Horus myth, he takes refuge under an acacia tree. The jujube, or zizyphus tree, was also mentioned in the Pyramid Texts in association with Sobek.20 Evidence of shrines for the crocodile deity in the gardens, as well as actual crocodiles in the ponds and lakes, is traced from the Old Kingdom to the Ptolemaic periods.21 In Pyramid Text 1485a it states, “Hail thou sycamore who protects the god under which the gods of the underworld are standing.”22 In Pyramid text 808a–b, it describes the service that the sacred tree provides for the deceased. It reads, “The date palm serves thee, the jujube tree turns its head to thee, that is as Anubis does for thee.”23 The soul, or ba, of the deceased was allowed to sit on the branches of the sanctified tree like a bird.24

There are many references concerning the sacred association of trees and birds. During the Old Kingdom, birds were reared at the sun temple of Niuserre, and also at Saqqara.25 Aviaries were part of the designs of the gardens and held falcons, symbolizing Horus, ibises, symbolizing Thoth, Herons, symbolizing Bennu, and geese, which could represent Amun, Hapy, Harpokrates, or

Gengen-wer. There is evidence that these birds were present in the gardens as representations of deity. Mummified versions of them, especially of ibises, have been found at Saqqara, Hermopolis, Athribis, and Abydos. However, it will be shown later that this tradition of aviaries continued during the Amarna period. Pyramid Text 916a refers to the dead man’s last journey to the sycamore in the eastern horizon. The gods sit in this tree like the birds whose forms are assumed by the souls of the dead. The natural presence of the birds among the trees contributed to the stage-like structure of the gardens.

Among other trees associated with birds was the persea tree. The persea tree contained fruit that was mentioned in texts dating back to the Pre-dynastic period. It is described in the list of sacred groves in seventeen nomes of Upper and Lower Egypt. It is similar to an avocado tree and became important in the temple gardens at Heliopolis and Herakleopolis. This tree, along with the willow, represented the Bennu bird, which was characterized by another bird, the gray heron.

By the Eleventh Dynasty, the gardens seemed to also be symbolic of the pharaoh’s power and status. Mentuhopte I’s funerary garden at Deir el Bahari was approximately 50 m. by 50 m. There is evidence of tamarisk and sycamore trees in the garden, and giant figures of Mentuhopte were placed between them. The design was intended to replicate the grave of Osiris. Written on Queen Menuhopte’s sarcophagus is the phrase, “I have embraced the sycamore and I have joined the sycamore.” Again, this highlights the sycamore tree and the implications involved with its presence in a garden, but it also promotes the consistency of its presence in the gardens.

In the Middle Kingdom, Sesostris II planted a uniform grove of trees at el-Lahun. They were planted in pits and cut into the bedrock. Excavator W. M. Flinders Petrie counted forty-two holes on the south side, forty-one on the east, and twelve on the west. He suggested that each tree represented a nome, equaling the number of nomes at in Egypt at the current time. This once more, shows the slight shift in the function of the gardens, to emphasize the pharaoh’s power through the use of gardens and to portray the vastness of the kingdom over which he ruled. This was accomplished in combination with the previous gardens created. A model of a garden was discovered under the floor of the tomb chapel of Meketre, chancellor to King Mentuhotpe (fig. 4). It depicts a garden with a pond and surrounding trees, the house with it is small in comparison. This illustrates prestige a garden provided. A model of one’s home to take to the afterlife would have been a necessary addition to the burial chamber.

In Tuthmosis I’s chapel at Ineni, the following inscription is carved: “He

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30. Wilkinson, The Garden in Ancient Egypt, 73.
goes through his district in the west [that is, the necropolis] and refreshes himself under the sycamore trees and inspects those beautiful gardens which he planted on earth while in favor of this sublime god Amun the Lord of Thebes." As the gardens were considered a place for relaxation and refreshment, this inscription suggests the more enjoyable tradition of the garden as a place for repose. In the tomb of Tuthmosis III, there is a painting of his family approaching a sycamore tree containing Hathor, nursing Tuthmosis. The use of the gardens seems in this case to combine religious symbolism with power and prestige.

In the New Kingdom there was an increase in demand for the flowers of the persea tree. The Egyptians considered them life giving and named them the "flowers of life." They were used for funerals more during the New Kingdom than they had been in the past, and many were found in the tomb of Tutankhamun. Another example of integrating new plants is Queen Hatshepsut. She is known to have imported myrrh trees from Punt, which were exotic to Egypt (fig. 5). This was a combination of a demonstration of her power with a secular desire to accumulate unfamiliar items from lands outside of Egypt. The evidence at the site suggests that the garden was of typical formation. It included terracing, uniform structure of trees in a grove, and a pool.

When Akhenaten moved his residence from Thebes to Middle Egypt he chose a desolate piece of desert. He led his kingdom to a new site in order to escape the influence of the past and establish his new religion. There he built a city full of gardens. The city was abandoned after his death and thus archeologists

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34. Mysliwiec, Eighteenth Dynasty Before the Amarna Period, 89–90.
35. Wilkinson, The Garden in Ancient Egypt, 76.
have been able to recover a lot of evidence about the nature of the city. The stretch of land which the gardeners had to work was exposed land. It was vulnerable to extreme winds and temperatures in March and April. Temperatures were blistering in the summer and could reach freezing in the winter. The plants for the gardens would have been brought from a considerable distance, most likely from other royal gardens on boats. The city was located along the Nile, opposite Hermopolis.

The soil was dry and of poor quality. In order for the trees and shrubbery to be planted, the gardeners would have prepared deep, large pits with gallons of water. Additional water would have been necessary to keep the plants alive. Evidence of date palms has been found there. They would have been difficult to transport to el-Amarna because the growing point at the top of the tree, considered its “heart,” was easily breakable. Although it was a difficult task, Akhenaten made the effort to bring all the plants that were in the gardens before him. Grape vines, sycamore, fig, and persea trees would have taken two to three years to mature from the cutting and transplanting process. The rest of the plants were grown from seed and the water lilies and papyrus would have been transported from the river. The city was occupied for fourteen years and the gardeners were successful in keeping up the plants, despite the use of large quantities of water.

There is evidence at el-Amarna that there were gardens with terraced

Fig. 5: Trees from Punt, Funerary Temple of Queen Hatshepsut.
Eighteenth Dynasty

trees leading down to pools (fig. 6). This important feature, dating back to the Old Kingdom, originally symbolized Nun and the primordial waters of creation. The lake was an essential part of the maru. A maru in Amarna is a place of “seeing,” and so on temple grounds it was the “seeing place” of Aten. The lake was surrounded by sycamore, palm, and acacia trees, with papyrus and water lilies growing at the banks before the terraced steps that went down into the water.

An aviary was contained in the northern maru. The aviaries at Amarna were similar to those of the Old Kingdom and contained the same animals that originally represented deities, especially in association with the persea tree, which was present in the gardens with the aviaries. The tradition of birds in the gardens in association with Bennu began in the time of Tuthmosis III and extended into the Ptolemaic period. This included an aviary with birds that were free to roam among persea trees.

The maru was also a place were the divine power of the king was displayed to foreign emissaries and to his people. It was through the ceremonies and the beauty of the landscaping that this was accomplished. This concept is similar to the use of the garden that more fully developed in the Middle to New Kingdoms. Mentuhotep I, Sesostris II, and Tuthmosis I, and Hatshepsut are

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43. Wilkinson, The Garden in Ancient Egypt, 150.
examples of using the gardens simply to promote their power through concepts not based on deity or religious ideas. This was combined with the religious symbolism in the garden, but in the Old Kingdom, the way the pharaoh’s power was displayed in the garden was through religious symbolism alone, where the ruler embodied deity. The King’s House Garden at the palace in Amarna was parallel to the great gardens at Karnak. It was intended to impress the court and foreigners with the power and greatness of the king.  

“The two turquoise sycamore tree between which Re goes forth,” remained in the gardens as well. In temple and private gardens of the royal family, this same arrangement that existed in the Old Kingdom has been found. Akhenaten described all living creatures and plants being drawn from the sun. A poem in the tomb of Ay describes Aten’s role in all living things. “When the chick in the egg speaks in the shell, you give him breath to sustain him. And, all beasts browse on their herbs, trees, herbs are sprouting, birds fly from their nests, their wings greeting your ka.” The nature that the gardens represented was in praise to Aten, however their structure and form did not change like the artwork and location of the capital. For Akhenaten, the symbolism in the gardens may not have been as strong as it was in the Old Kingdom, as he did not attempt to change them in a manner that would further glorify Aten and further promote his elimination of time-honored religious practices.

The plants used in the Amarna gardens were the same used in the other gardens, previously representing Re, Min, Thoth, Isis, Osiris, Hathor, and Horus. These plants were native to Egypt and would have been used regardless. However, Akhenaten maintained the same structure in the gardens that had existed since the Old Kingdom. The pools, the groves of trees and their formations previously represented deity and furthermore, contained birds that also were symbolic of deity and associated with the ba of the deceased souls.

In the Ptolemaic period, the gardens continued a similar design. We have more access to evidence of the gardens since it was more recent than the times of the pharaohs. Sir Flinders Petrie was able to excavate many plant specimens from Ptolemaic sites. The sites contain gardens that show the same design employed in the Old Kingdom. The gardens persistently held importance in the culture as a relaxing and tranquil location. However, evidence suggesting that there was not a change in the format during Akhenaten’s reign proposes an evolution from a symbolic garden to a traditional.

46. Wilkinson, The Garden in Ancient Egypt, 166.