

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN PALACE: THE TRIPARTITE PLAN OF AUDIENCE SYSTEM

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The royal palace was undoubtedly a major institution of ancient Egyptian royal cities, but it has received relatively little attention among Egyptological literature in favour of religious architecture.¹ This brief essay intends to review some common architectural features, which are recognizable in Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom and Late Period royal palaces, in spite of their variability and complexity. One aspect of the palace that seems to repeat a similar pattern in chronological development of palatial architecture is the audience system; it shows a process of standardization culminating in New Kingdom, with the elaboration of a tripartite plan, an axial pattern of inner circulation and a specific decoration theme.

1. PREMISE

The attempt at defining a typology of ancient Egyptian royal palaces is possible from the Middle Kingdom onwards, when archaeological remains are sufficiently extensive to allow an architectural analysis of the buildings. For earlier periods, and thus for the Predynastic Period and the Old Kingdom, documentation consists mainly in texts which provide the terminology used to define the royal palaces and the iconography used for their representation in hieroglyphic writing. Even for more recent times palaces at Itjtawy, Memphis, Karnak and Piramesse have not been excavated and are known only by quotations in written sources. Moreover, the architectural reconstruction of archeologically known royal palaces of the Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom and Late Period, is often based on few and bad-preserved mud-brick structures and hampered by the preliminary form of the excavation reports.

A provincial Middle Kingdom palace complex has been excavated at Tell Basta and was probably used by Amenemhat III on his visit to the temple of Bastet (fig. 1).² Another building dated to the early 12th Dynasty has been found at Ezbet Rushdi, in the northeast sector of Khatana-Qantir.³ The southern area F/I of the same site was occupied by another official building erected during the 13th Dynasty and interpreted as royal mansion.⁴ Another palace in area F/II has been partly excavated and dates back to the middle of the Hyksos

¹ Significant exceptions are philological discussions on the word “palace” and its multiple meaning, such as Goelet’s considerations of the terms *‘t*, *stp-s3*, *pr-‘3* and *pr-nswt* in the Egyptian Old Kingdom (Goelet 1982; 1986); studies on the role of the New Kingdom royal palace and its connection with the royal cities (Lacovara 1997; Bietak 2005; Spence 2007); O’Connor’s attempts to distinguish different types of palaces and their function (O’Connor 1989; 1995); Stadelman’s analysis of the ritual palaces attached to the mortuary temple of the 19th Dynasty (Stadelmann 1973; 1979).

² Farid 1964; El-Sawi 1979; Bakr 1979; Van Siclen 1996, 239.

³ Adam 1959.

⁴ It may have belonged to a local governor or an ephemeral king (Bietak 2010, 20; 1996, 21-30, fig. 18; 1984, 325-332; Bietak - Dorner 1994; Eigner 1996).

period.⁵ Towards the end of the 17th Dynasty a palatial complex comprising two different platforms, the so-called “North Palace” (fig. 2) and “South Palace”, was erected near Deir el-Ballas in Upper Egypt.⁶

However the examples of palatial architecture increase during the New Kingdom, especially thanks to the discovery of two cities became headquarters of administration and residence during the 18th Dynasty: Malqata,⁷ the city-palace of Amenhotep III and Amarna,⁸ the capital of Amenhotep IV. Both the sites, extensively investigated, have revealed many palatial buildings and allowed the observation of their link with the topographical layout of the entire cities.

The site of Tell el-Dab‘a has preserved a huge palatial quarter of the Tuthmosid Period consisting of three palaces built on mud-brick casemate foundations: the Palace F⁹ in area H/I (fig. 3), G¹⁰ in area H/IV-III (fig. 4) and J¹¹ in area H/IV (fig. 5). Afterwards the 19th Dynasty chose Qantir in eastern Delta as site for a new residential city and palace: here Ramesses II decided to build his royal residence known by text as Piramesse. Architectural decorations, such as glazed tiles and faïence inlays from door frames, and traces of the walls are the remaining evidences of this building.

The 19th Dynasty is characterized by appearance of particular palaces built of mud-brick at the southern side of mortuary temples made of stone. These small buildings could never have served as residential palaces for living king, but had rather the symbolic function of *post-mortem* residences of the deified kings.¹² Generally known as Temple-Palaces or Million Years Palaces,¹³ - like those found within the mortuary temples of Sety I¹⁴ and Merenptah¹⁵ at Qurna, the Ramesseum of Ramesses II (fig. 8:5),¹⁶ and the complex of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu (fig. 8:6)¹⁷ - they are primary tools in studying the architectural plan of royal palaces because they reproduce in a small-scale version the main architectural features of real royal palaces.

⁵ Bietak - Forstner-Müller 2006; 2007; Bietak - Forstner-Müller - Herbich 2007.

⁶ Smith 1981, 156-157; Lacovara 1981.

⁷ Daressy 1903; Kemp - O'Connor 1974.

⁸ Proceeding from North to South in describing palaces discovered during different archaeological campaigns at Tell el-Amarna, the northeast part of the site, generally known as “North City” is occupied by the “North Riverside Palace”, a mud-brick structure of which only the double wall with square towers and a monumental doorway is preserved (Pendlebury 1931; 1933; Kemp 1983). On the south side of this was located another building called “North Palace” for its topographical position (Newton 1924; Whittemore 1926; Frankfort 1927; Spence 1999). The Central City, in the middle of the site, was occupied by the “Great Palace” and the “Royal Estate”, comprising the “King’s House” (Petrie 1894; Pendlebury 1951; Kemp 1989).

⁹ Janosi 1995; 1996; Bietak 1996; Bietak - Dorner - Janosi 2001.

¹⁰ Janosi 1995; Bietak - Forstner-Müller 2003; 2005.

¹¹ Bietak - Dorner - Janosi 2001, 85; Bietak 1997.

¹² Stadelmann 1973, 221-242; 1994, 311.

¹³ Stadelmann 1973; 1979.

¹⁴ Stadelmann 1977; 1982; 1991; 1998.

¹⁵ Petrie 1897; Jaritz 1996.

¹⁶ Hölscher 1939; 1941

¹⁷ Hölscher 1939; 1941; 1951.

Late Period examples of palatial architecture all date back to the 26th Dynasty and comprise typical mud-brick platforms built on casemate foundations. While palaces at Sais, the place of origin and residence of this Dynasty, are not known, a building with palatial features has recently been discovered in Buto.¹⁸ The platform at Memphis is known to have served as foundation for the Palace of Apries and represents the best-preserved royal building of this period.¹⁹ The purpose of other brick platforms discovered at Defenna,²⁰ Naukratis,²¹ Tell el-Balamun²² and Tanis²³ and their identification as the foundations of 26th Dynasty governorate buildings is still object of different interpretations.²⁴

2. ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

The planimetric variety of ancient Egyptian royal palaces, with their different extension and organization of inner spaces, suggest that they had to fulfil a broad range of different functions. Some common architectural features can be recognized and may have been intentional to ensure the performance of specific functions in a specific and repeated arrangement of spaces.

Where it is preserved, the audience system seems to follow a specific architectural tripartite model with succession of two columned reception halls and a nearly square throne room with columns and a throne pedestal (fig. 8). Following the chronological development of this device, it was probably experimented in Middle Kingdom - when this has not yet been fully standardized - and gradually developed in New Kingdom palaces - when it was arranged in a perfect axial shape. In 18th Dynasty buildings the three subsequent doors of the two hypostyle halls and the throne room were perfectly set in a row and symmetrically located around the exact central section of the entire palace.

The Middle Kingdom palace at Tell Basta (fig. 1) comprises a sequence of two rectangular courtyards, the first of which being a peristyle court with two rows of columns in front of the short northern side and the second one a hypostyle room with six columns, both longitudinally oriented in a north-south direction.²⁵ Despite the throne room at the bottom has not been recognized, it might have been located in some of side rooms flanking the second hypostyle hall, or at the northern end of the building, which has not been investigated.

In the 17th Dynasty North Palace (fig. 2) at Deir el-Ballas it's possible to hypothesize a reconstruction of the superstructure by observing the layout of the casemate walls that have been preserved in the northwest sector of the building. The palace may have been

¹⁸ Hartung 2003a; 2003b; 2007.

¹⁹ Petrie 1909; Kemp 1977; Kaiser 1987.

²⁰ Petrie - Murray - Griffith 1888, 48, 52-62, pl. XLIV.

²¹ Petrie - Smith - Gardiner 1886, 24-6, 32-4, pls. XLII-XLIII; Muhus 1994, 99-113.

²² Spencer 1996, 56, pls. 6, 31b, 32, 35a.

²³ Montet 1933, 76-88, pls. XXXV-XXXVIII.

²⁴ Spencer 1999.

²⁵ Van Siclen 1996, 239-243.

composed by a latitudinal hall, a large central hall - probably both columned - and a rear larger room with attached suites, rebuilt by Lacovara as a possible throne room.²⁶

Similarly, the layout of the superstructures upon platforms F, G and J in the Tuthmosid complex at Tell el-Dab'a can be rebuilt by the shape of preserved foundation-cells. The central sector of platform F²⁷ comprises a longitudinal rectangular hall, perpendicular to a second square room, behind which is a smaller rectangular space that can be hypothetically recognized as the royal throne room (fig. 3).

In platform G of the same site (fig. 4) a monumental *portico*-courtyard, which replaces the most common latitudinal hypostyle hall, is in front of a transversal vestibule and a quadrangular throne room shifted to the southeast corner of the latter room and therefore accessible through a door not aligned with the passage from the *portico* to the vestibule.²⁸

A similar elaboration of this device can be supposed also in complex J at Tell el-Dab'a (fig. 5), where the first latitudinal hall is replaced by a monumental peristyle courtyard, followed by a cross-hall;²⁹ the throne room at the bottom is different from that in Palace G for its rectangular shape and the perfectly axial arrangement with previous rooms. In all these palaces the three rooms composing the audience system are characterized by a variable number of columns.

In the North Palace at Amarna the recognition of the audience system has been facilitated by finding in the farthest room, on the floor raised over that of the previous hypostyle rooms, a platform leant against the bottom wall which was visible from the entrance between two central columns (fig. 8:4).³⁰ The area is composed by a symmetrical sequence of a square hypostyle hall, a second columned hall with latitudinal development and a roughly square room at the bottom.

A similar organization of space had already been tested at Malqata in Amenhotep III's Main Palace (fig. 6).³¹ Here the tripartite device with the latitudinal vestibule, the longitudinal courtyard and the square throne room at the end is elaborated by the addition of lateral suites - originally interpreted as residences for women of the royal harem and recently reconsidered in their ceremonial use³² - which necessarily require to lengthen the hypostyle hall in the middle.

²⁶ Lacovara 1981, 121, fig. 2.

²⁷ Janosi 1996, 96-97.

²⁸ Bietak - Forstner-Müller 2005, 86.

²⁹ Bietak - Dorner - Janosi 2001, 89-96.

³⁰ Whittemore 1926, 6.

³¹ Corresponding to the Main Palace at Malqata is the Northern Harem in the Central Palace of Amenhotep IV at Amarna. The heart of both complexes has been interpreted as royal harem, characterized by four harem suites flanking a central hypostyle hall on each side at Malqata and by small cells on both sides of a courtyard garden at Amarna.

³² The newest interpretive trends revise the female residential role of harem at Malqata and Amarna to define its character of palatial ceremonial complex inspired to New Kingdom templar architecture. In particular Dorothea Arnold has recently elaborated a new theory about the palatial complex at Malqata suggesting that the "harem suites" of the King's Palace were used by Amenhotep III to store facilities used during the performance of rituals related to the celebration of the Sed-festival, in Arnold 2002. In order to support the original interpretation of the central section of this palace as a harem component, O'Connor has presented a series of reasons which could be part of future debate, in O'Connor 2010. He also consider the frontal-hall,

The tripartite organization of audience system is reproduced in the Ramessid ritual palaces within the mortuary temples of western Thebes and is perfectly exemplified in the Palace of Merenptah at Memphis.

The scheme just described is perfectly scaled in the palaces built inside the *temenos* of Ramesses II's Ramesseum (fig. 8:5) and the Temple of Sety I and in the First Palace of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu (fig. 8:6). In the Theban palaces of Ay and Horemheb, where the first hypostyle hall is missing, only the columned hall and the next square throne room are recognizable.³³ In Merenptah's palace at Qurna the model of Ramesseum is reproduced in a very simplified and reduced shape: the first hypostyle hall is replaced by a *portico* with eight columns which leads to two perfectly axial rooms, with the same shape and with four square columns each, the last one being used as throne room.³⁴

In the complex of Ramesses III the first hypostyle room corresponds with the *portico*, at the southern end of the building, which worked also as courtyard entrance to the funerary temple (fig. 8:6). The second hypostyle hall was not directly accessible from the *portico* through a central door, the middle of the palace façade being occupied by a significant feature of all these palaces, the Window of Appearance.³⁵ The entrances were near the corners of the façade opening on two small rooms that led to the central courtyard from two doors on its eastern and western sides. An entry in line with the Window of Appearance at the bottom of the hypostyle hall linked it with the throne room. It consisted in a square room with four columns, where the king sat on a raised platform leant against the bottom wall, approached by frontal steps.

Despite the inner circulation system was not perfectly axial as in other New Kingdom building, forcing a 90° bend before reaching the throne, the succession of the rooms seems to follow the tripartite model of the audience component. A final break in the axial arrangement can be observed in the second phase of construction of the palace, when the entrance hall is transformed into a small transverse vestibule leading directly to the throne room, which is now simply a large room with two rows of three columns.³⁶ In both phases of construction small private rooms are attached to the throne room; the dimension of the residential increased in the second building phase.

The Palace of Merenptah at Memphis (fig. 9:b) exhibits a perfect example of the main features of the audience pavilion: a columned reception hall, a transversal hypostyle hall and the throne room with an elongated platform at the bottom. An addition to this core is that of a back room with two columns, slightly shifted to the northwest corner of the throne room and surrounded by rooms for sleeping and rest.³⁷

the elongated hall and the throne room to which the latter leads as specific harem components. In both the discussions, the central section of the palace is presented as space of a ceremonial nature, where ceremonies related to the recreation and renewal of the king took place.

³³ Hölscher 1939, 81-82.

³⁴ Jaritz 1996, 112.

³⁵ Hölscher 1929, 40.

³⁶ Hölscher 1941, 44.

³⁷ Fisher 1915, 225; 1921; O'Connor 1991, 177.

On the basis of a possible comparison between the Northern Harem at Amarna and the Palace of Merenptah (fig. 9), the Main Hall of the Amarna complex could be interpreted as the seat of the royal throne. The floor decoration with a band of caught enemies in the middle, which was arranged in the central axis of the hypostyle hall, the Main Hall and the columned hall at the southeast side of the latter, would have shown the way towards the seat of the Pharaoh and the royal residential area (fig. 7).³⁸ With these issues providing a context, the room with faïence pillars slightly shifted to the southeast side of the throne room could be interpreted as a central hall leading to the royal apartments like the small room with two columns at the back of Merenptah's Palace.

The Palace of Apries shows a completely different organization of inner spaces that makes the audience device not easily recognizable. Probably a large peristyle courtyard gave access to the audience system, but this has not been identified and the excavated section of the palace suggests the ending of the New Kingdom planimetric standardization.

3. DECORATIVE FEATURES

The location of the throne hall at the bottom of two hypostyle rooms might have had the symbolic function of preparing visitors for the royal audience through a linear course evoking the submission of enemies and strangers to the king. As of the Northern Harem at Amarna, even if a throne or other similar installations have not been identified, the floor decoration with a row of captured Nubians and Asians was intended, for everyone who went through the palace, to evoke the power of the king and the control of the state on foreign people; a similar representation suits with the interpretation of this sector (fig. 7).³⁹ The same topic is attested on a fragment of wall painting from the palace of Malqata with the figure of the king seated on a throne and two prisoners at his sides, which probably was placed at the bottom of the large hypostyle hall, on one of the walls siding the door of the next throne room.⁴⁰ Four fragments of stone slabs related to a throne basement with figures of captured enemies were reused in the staircase of the Window of Appearance in the First Palace at Medinet Habu.⁴¹ Similar scenes were carved on columns of the hypostyle hall and

³⁸ In the first hypostyle hall, transversal to the courtyard with garden, the floor was decorated by a band of caught enemies distributed in row along the axis of the nave, which leant to the next hall. There were figures of Nubians and Asiatic with bound arms, which respectively represented southern and northern enemies of Egypt. On the sides of this central decoration were depicted rectangular panels with wavy lines representing water. Around these ducks were represented flying over the pool together with running calves. On the south side of this transversal hall there was a room, approximately square, in which fragments of a similar decoration have been found. Another room attached to the southeast side of the central hall with twelve faïence columns was decorated with similar motifs of prisoners, animals and flower compositions (Petrie 1894, 8, 12-14).

³⁹ The theme of captured enemies is combined with that of aquatic birds, fishes, water and plants; while the first should have evoked the submission of enemies by the king, the second one probably intended to celebrate the role of king in warranting fertility and wealth for the country. In the North Palace the animal and vegetal motif is prevailing, and it's richly exemplified on the walls of the so-called Green Room, one of the northwest cells, and on the ceiling of the stables decorated with bunches of grapes (Newton 1924, 297; Whittemore 1926, 69).

⁴⁰ Smith 1981, 168.

⁴¹ Hölscher 1941, figs. 19, 30, 31.

the throne room of the First Palace itself.⁴² In Merenptah's Palace the twenty-four stone blocks of the throne pedestal were decorated with the motif of imprisoned enemies and arches alternated inside a frame of disks and floral panels enclosed by a scheme of birds with spread wings.⁴³ The theme of subjugation of enemies emerges as a distinctive theme of the audience system; in particular it should be distinctive in the decoration of the podium on which the royal throne was placed, as confirmed by the examples of Medinet Habu and Memphis, the representations of the platform of Amenhotep III's throne in private tombs at Thebes⁴⁴ and the discovery of painting fragments with figures of kneeling enemies that must have belonged to the podium of the throne of King's House at Amarna.⁴⁵

4. CONCLUSIONS

The variations in size and plan of Egyptian royal palaces during the course of the time and the difference among more buildings at the same site hamper their full integration into a modern classification system of monumental architecture. Archaeological evidence suggests that palaces in ancient Egypt were multi-functional complexes of monumental size or cluster of buildings and not only the places where Pharaohs dwelled. Their functions spanned from residential to governmental, economic, defensive and ceremonial ones and were performed in specifically dedicated spaces inside the same structure. In spite of complexity and chronological variations of palaces, it's possible to recognize common architectural features at the basis of their construction. These were not exclusive models of palaces and were indistinctly used in religious, domestic and storage architecture. Thus for example, the living quarters - whether they were inserted in a private *villa* or in a royal palace - were planned according to repeated architectural rules; the shape and location of storehouses were the same whether they have served in a noble residence, a temple or a palace; the succession of a reception courtyard, a hypostyle hall and a throne room was arranged both in temples and palaces, probably according to their ceremonial function. It can be recognized a standardization process, which would have culminated in planning New Kingdom palaces, temples, houses, and service sectors and generally urban architecture. Instead of thinking that a specific "architectural category" - domestic, religious or palatial - would have inspired the structure of another, one can assume a starting architectural model with recurring features designed to serve its specific functions. The repetition of the tripartite plan of the audience system with succession of two hypostyle rooms and a throne room at the bottom can be reconsidered in this process of architectural canonization. This planimetric scheme, preceded by Middle Kingdom experiments, was elaborated in New Kingdom palaces. The axial shape of the audience pavilion was definitively executed at Malqata, in the Main Palace, and Amarna, in the North Palace and the Northern Harem of the Great Palace, and was perfectly exemplified in Merenptah's Palace, generating a pattern of straight lines: all the doors opening in the middle of a sequence of rooms were lined up, making the throne against the rear wall of the last room

⁴² Hölscher 1941, pls. 7, 33:E.

⁴³ Fisher 1915, fig. 82:2; 1921, pl. III; Jeffrey - Malek - Smith 1986, 10-11, fig. 6.

⁴⁴ These include tombs of Anen and Kheruef at Thebes.

⁴⁵ Weatherhead 1995, fig. 2.

visible from the front entrance of the palace. This planimetric scheme was impressively scaled in the Million Years Palace of the 19th Dynasty where the clearest difference consists in the inner walking pattern; the hypostyle hall in front of the throne room was not directly accessible from the first *portico*, but only from two vestibules on each side of the central axis, because the opening in the middle of the façade could not be really practical, being occupied by the Window of Appearance. Collected data have brought out that a unitary conception of building and decoration was possibly at the basis of the audience system in ancient Egyptian palaces and that it was kept and developed through different periods of ancient Egyptian architecture, to be probably abandoned since the 26th Dynasty.

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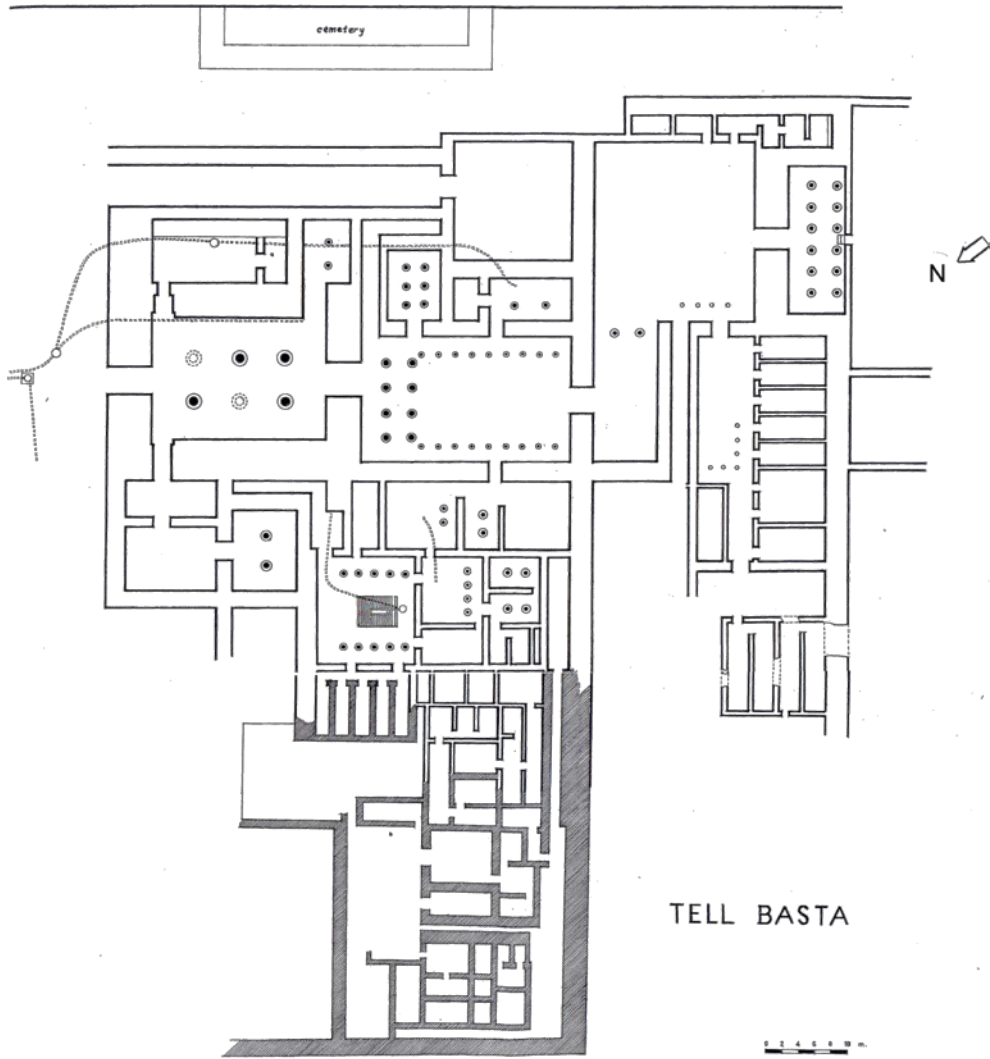


Fig. 1: Middle Kingdom palace at Tell Basta (Bakr 1979, fig. 13).

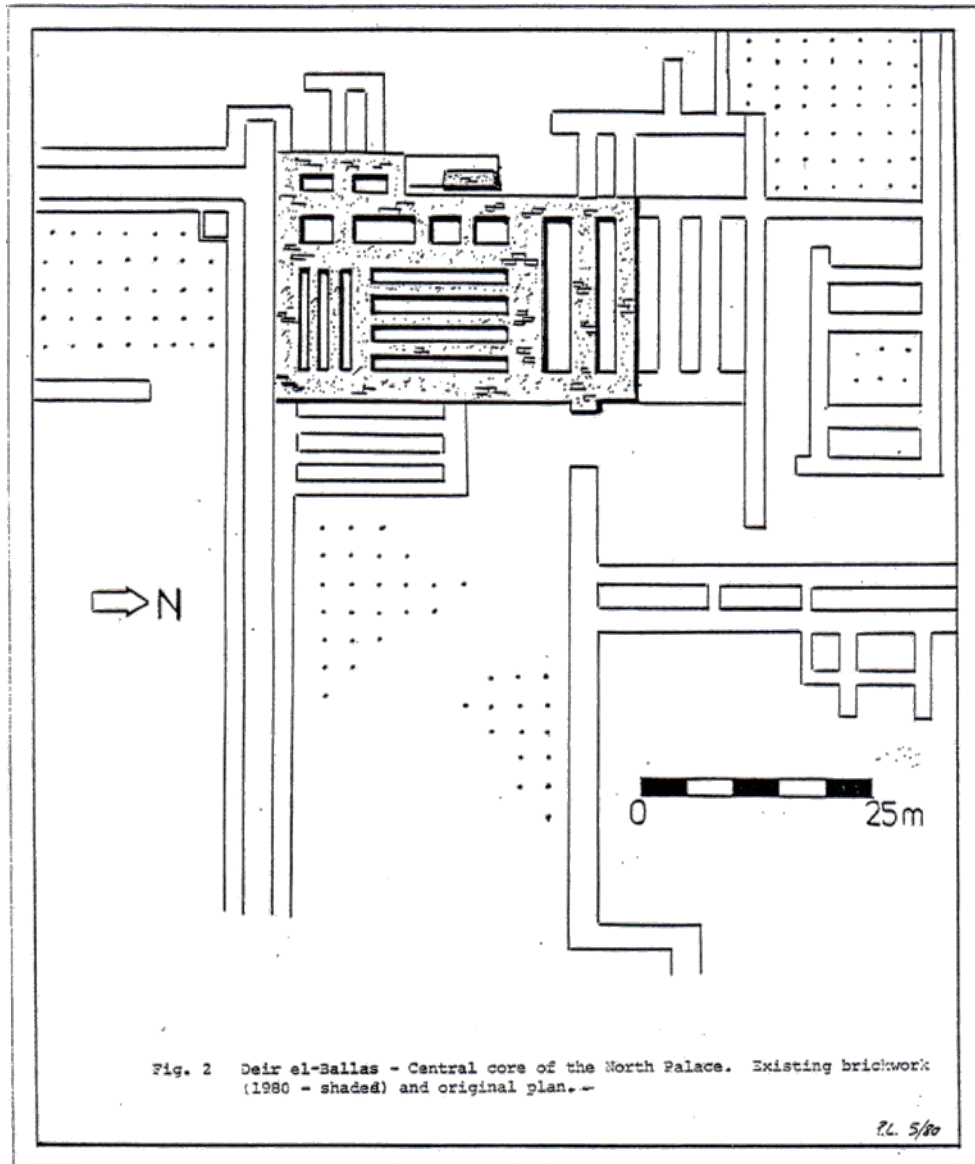


Fig. 2: Reconstruction of the central sector of palace at Deir el-Ballas (Lacovara 1980, fig. 2).

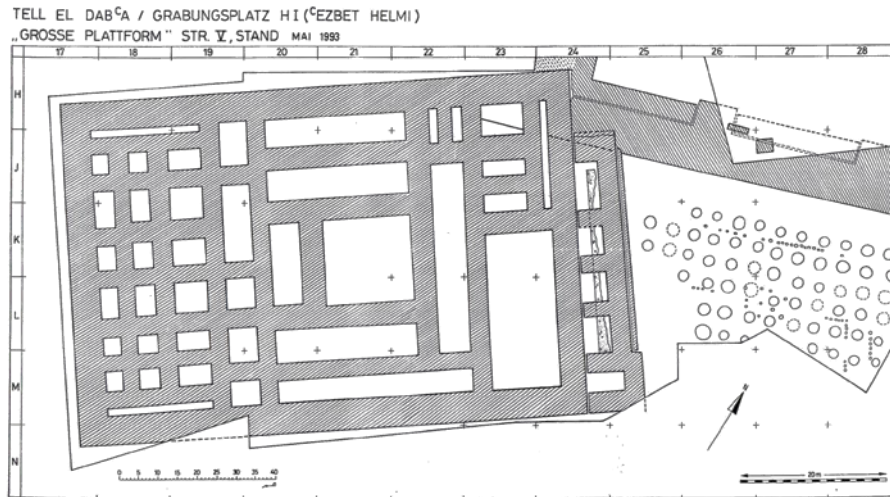


Fig. 3: Platform F in area H/I at Tell el-Dab'a (Janosi 1994, fig. 10).

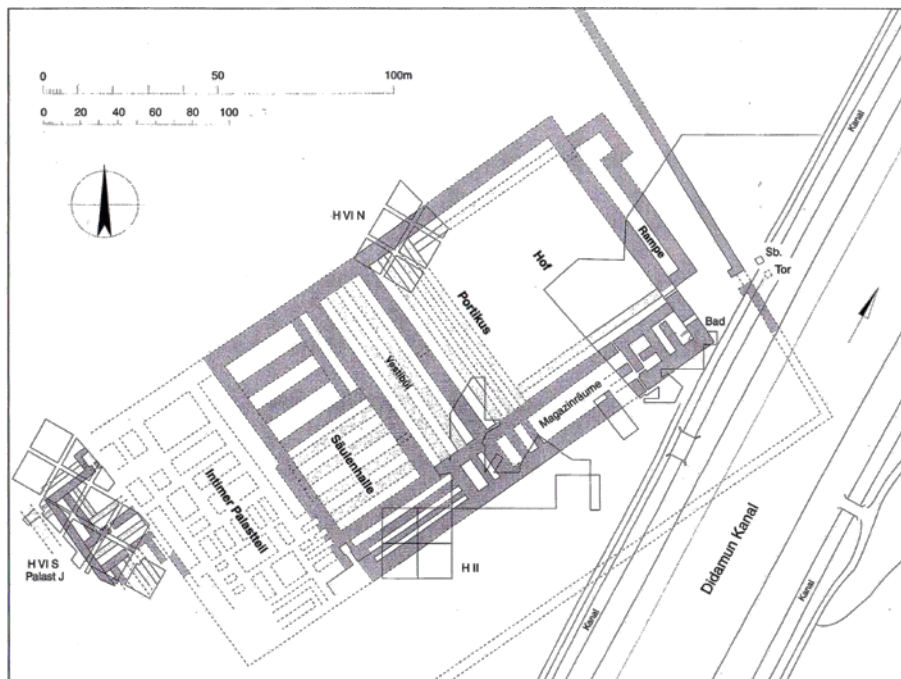


Fig. 4: Platform G in area H at Tell el-Dab'a: stratum d (Bietak - Dorner - Janosi 2001, fig. 34a).

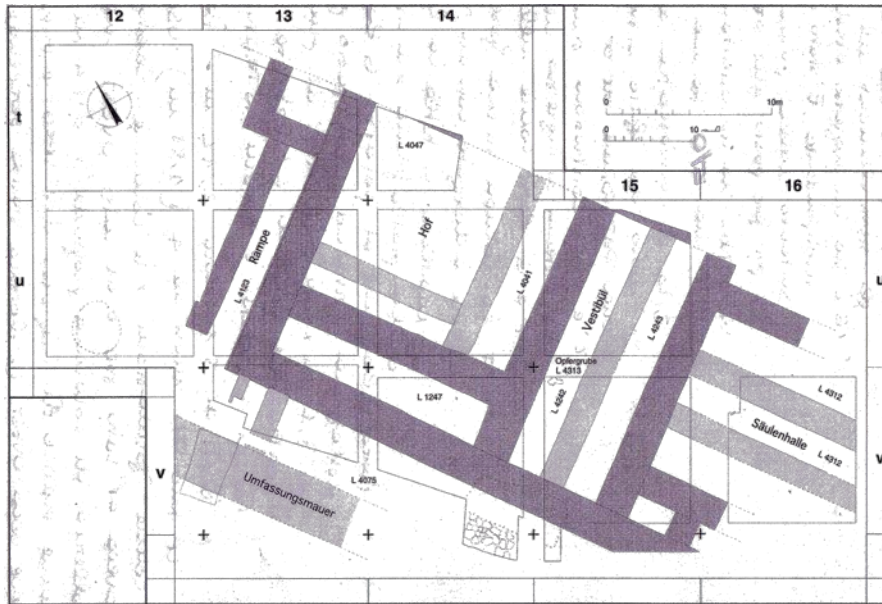


Fig. 5: Platform J in area H at Tell el-Dab'a (Bietak 2001, fig. 41).



Fig. 6: Main Palace at Malqata (Smith 1981, fig. 55).

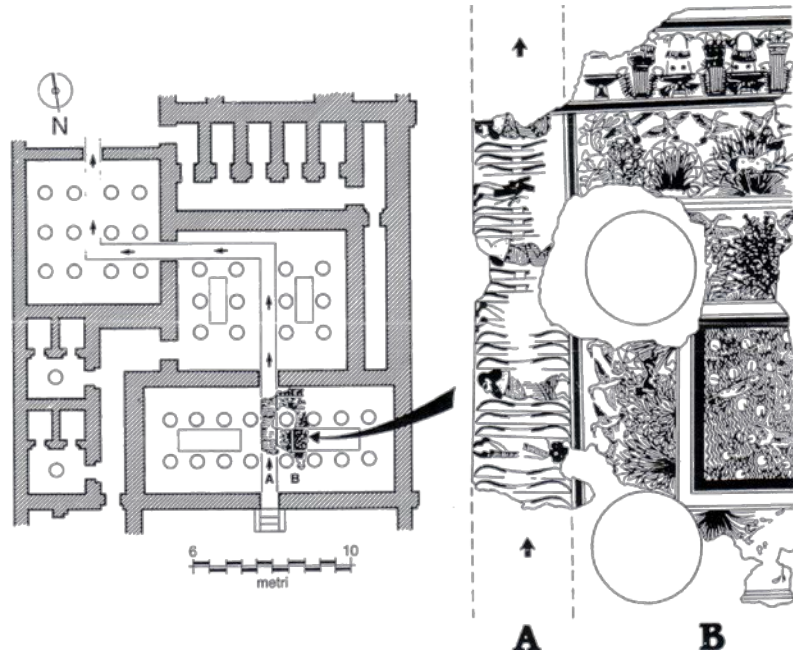


Fig. 7: Floor decoration in the audience system of Northern Harem at Tell el-‘Amarna (Kemp 1989, fig. 87).

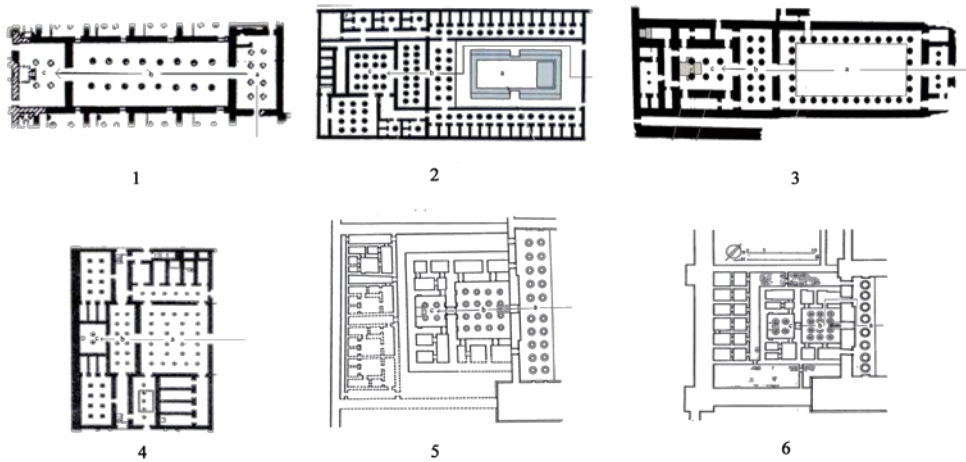


Fig. 8: 1, Central sector of the Main Palace at Malqata; 2, Central Sector of Northern Harem in the Central Palace at Amarna; 3, Merenptah’s Palace at Memphis; 4, Northern sector of the North Palace at Amarna; 5, Palace of Ramesses II in the Ramesseum; 6, First Palace of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu.

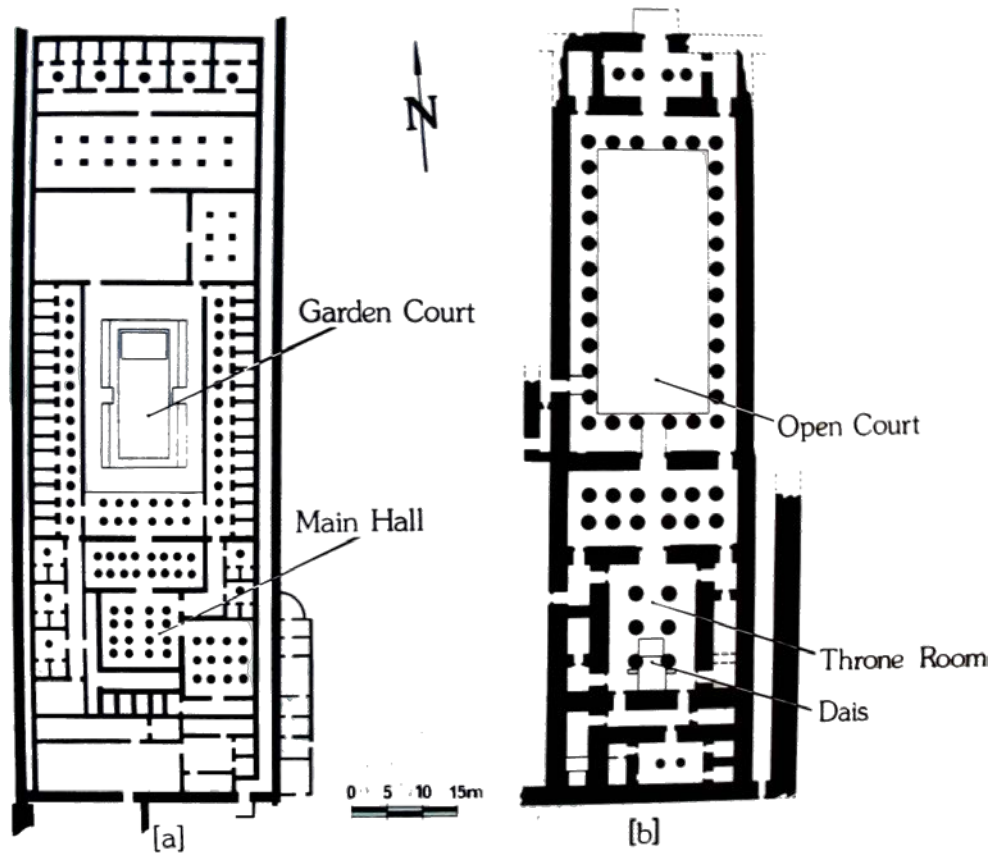


Fig. 9: a, Northern Harem at Amarna; b, Merenptah's Palace at Memphis (Weatherhead 1992, fig. 6).