To my children

Page 2 | The Dome of the Rock from Hartmann Schedel's *Nuremberg Chronicle*, 1493.
Pages 4–5 | Maya sarcophagus lid depicting the soul's journey after death.

ART+IMAGINATION

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THE TEMPLE'S MANY NAMES

'TEMPLUM', says the 1st-century BC Roman writer Varro, 'is the name given to a place set aside and limited by certain formulaic words for the purpose of augury or the taking of auspices.' From this come our words 'temple' and 'contemplate', which refer to the sacred, demarcated zone of the temple, that which was within the augur's range of vision, that which he 'contemplated'. Where there is no temple, there is, strictly speaking, no 'contemplation'.

There are three world regions in the cosmos: the sky, the earth and the underworld, all of which are united in the temple.

The Latin root *tem* (to cut) has a cognate in Greek, *temno*, from which the word *temenos* derives. A *temenos* was 'a precinct, a piece of land marked off from common uses and dedicated to a god'. We now use *temenos* to mean the platform on which the temple building stands – an architectural structure that separated the building off from common, everyday activities. But the Greek root has a much more ancient predecessor in Sumerian, *temen*, which meant a heaped-up pile of earth, as in the name of the Neo-Babylonian ziggurat (the traditional Tower of Babel), the *E-Temen-An-Ki*, the 'House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth'.

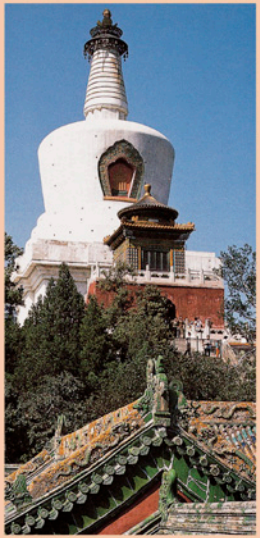
Varro, in *De Lingua Latina*, states that there are three temples: of the sky, of the earth and of the underworld. We see this reflected in the Babylonian temple name and it brings us to the universal idea that there are three world regions in the cosmos: the sky, the earth and the underworld, all of which are united in the temple, with its central pillar (sometimes, as in Scandinavia, a world-tree), connecting the three zones.

→ According to the Bible, a tower was constructed in Babylon to connect the earthly world to the heavens. In this 1563 representation of the Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (detail) the structure resembles a ziggurat, or stepped pyramid, such as the *E-Temen-An-Ki* in Babylon.

THE HEAVENLY PROTOTYPE

THE inscriptions of the Sumerian king Gudea of Lagash place great emphasis on the temple as the *temen abzu*, the 'Foundation of the Abyss', or as the 'House of the Abyss', meaning that its foundations are sunk deep within the primordial waters, and rise up out of these waters. But there is another important aspect of the cosmology of the temple. Not only do creation and life come up out of the depths, *de profundis*, they come down from the sky, from the heavens, the classic dwelling place of the gods. The basic idea is that there exists in the sky a perfect place, the 'city' of the gods. The goal of human life is both to establish contact with this place, and to return to it after death, thus to share in the life of the gods. The primary way by which the gods share with humans the knowledge of this place, and information on how one gets there, is through the temple. The earthly temple is an exact replica of a heavenly temple.

The god reveals to a king, prophet or shaman the architectural plan for the earthly temple, which is a duplicate of the temple in heaven. Exodus chapters 19 and 25 give us the classic pattern: the prophet ascends the mountain. There, the prophet is given a 'pattern' to examine. That 'pattern' is the temple (or here, tabernacle, the prototype of the Israelite temple in Jerusalem) which exists in heaven: 'According to all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so shall you make it' (Exodus 25:9).



The form of the White Dagoba in the Forbidden City in Beijing (above) is a large stupa, similar to the ones at Samye (opposite), and is symbolic of Mount Meru, the centre of the Buddhist universe. It is also a container for relics.

→ The layout of the 8th-century Tibetan Buddhist temple of Samye is a giant mandala – a pattern-like representation of the Buddhist universe and a tool for reaching enlightenment. Painting from the 18th or 19th century.

SACRED GEOMETRY

BY sacred geometry we mean a mathematics that had as its purpose the accurate laying out of the temple ground plan in relation to the cardinal directions and to the heavens; in other words, the ritually proper and absolutely accurate transferral of the heavenly plan onto the earth. The temple is the reduced plan of the cosmos, and as such must be an accurate representation of the heavenly prototype. Accuracy is vitally important. A wrong orientation would bring death, destruction and all manner of disasters.

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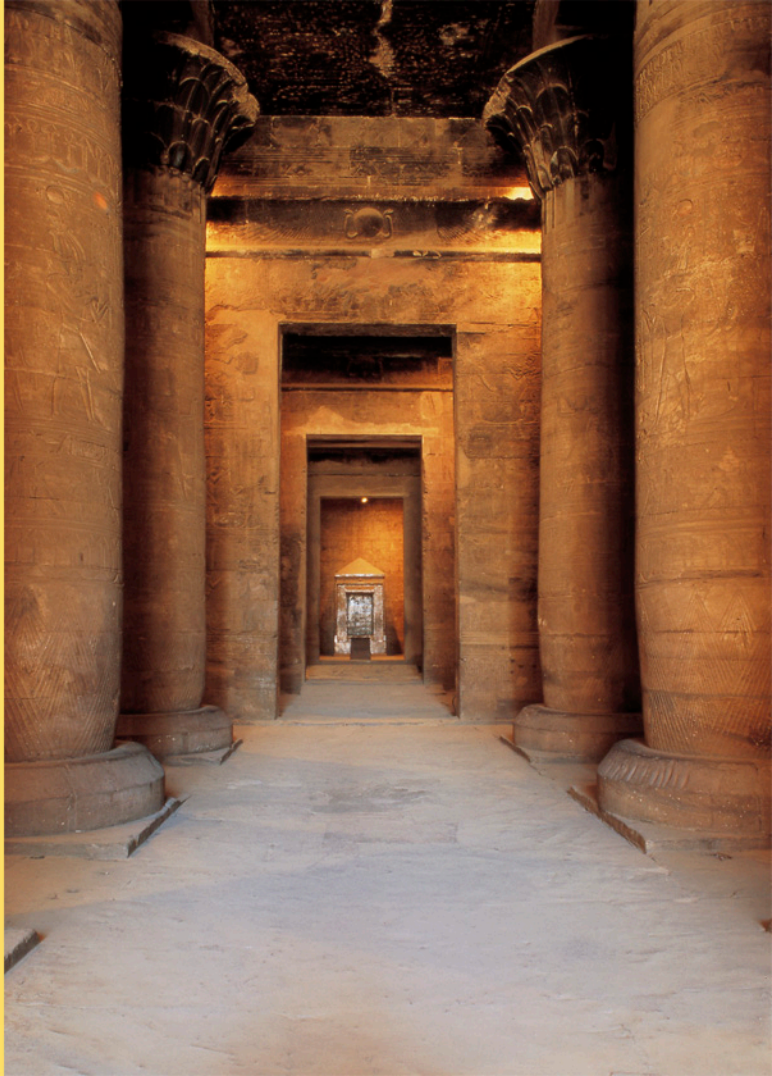
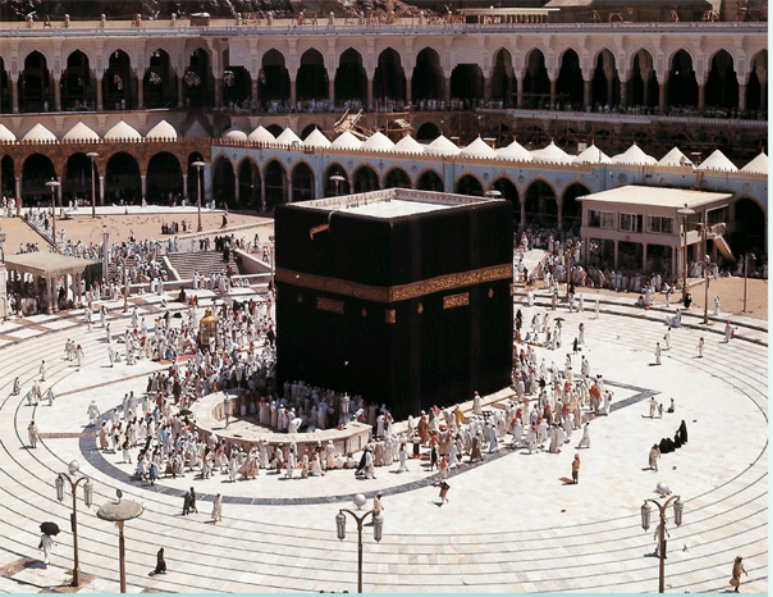
All of these considerations made the actual preparation of the site and laying of the foundations actions that were immersed in ritual. Chief among these was the 'stretching of the cord', well attested in both ancient Egypt and India, a kind of 'sacred surveying', which established the ground plan of the building, set its four corners – oriented to the cardinal directions – and brought the earthly building into relationship with the gods of the heavens and the constellations, or the gods in their guise as constellations.

The ritual of stretching the cord is known in Egypt from as early as the Second Dynasty king Khasekhemwy to as late as the Ptolemaic Period Temple of Edfu (built between 237 and 57 BC). The astronomical ceiling from the unfinished tomb of Senmut at Deir el-Bahri (about 1458 BC) gives a fascinatingly clear view of the astronomical underpinnings of this rite. The rite continued virtually unchanged over several thousand years, and in fact the Edfu texts state that the ritual of stretching the cord originated with the legendary architect, sage, physician and magician, Imhotep of the reign of Djoser (Third Dynasty).



→ The inscribed columns and inner sanctum of the Temple of Horus at Edfu. The temple itself is said to be built on the location of a cosmic battle between the gods Horus and Seth.



Within Islam, the primary ritual action of the Pilgrimage – circumambulation seven times around the Kaabah – originates in Heaven. Just as in Heaven the angels walk around the Divine Throne, so on earth human beings walk around the earthly model of the Heavenly Throne. Just as the earthly temple is based on a heavenly archetype, so also is earthly ritual based on heavenly ritual. The number seven is archetypal, representing the seven millennia of earthly existence, as well as the seventy thousand angels who surround the Heavenly Throne, the seven divine attributes, and the seven veils that separate God from humankind. Ritual thus also partakes of sacred geometry. What exactly does circumambulation represent in esoteric Islam, other than being a pattern of heavenly action? It is a process of taking possession of totality, of encircling, encompassing, as well as being encompassed by, universal intelligence. It signifies the restoration within oneself of the White Pearl, restored from the Black Stone, restoring within oneself the celestial body of light which originates in the heavenly realms and is to be found in the earthly model of the celestial, the Kaabah.

The ancient peoples who painted shrines such as these at Lascaux, France, would have had to undertake a treacherous journey in order to reach a suitable place to make the painting.

← It is every Muslim's duty to complete a pilgrimage to Mecca once in his or her lifetime. At this unique focus of Islamic devotion, worshippers must circumambulate the Kaabah seven times.

Erich Neumann called ritual 'the archetype of the way'. The earliest 'way' into the centre that is recorded in human experience, he believed, is to be found in the Upper Paleolithic caves of Europe. Fundamental to the cave shrines of Laussel, Pech Merle, and Lascaux was the dark, dangerous journey into the deep interior of the caves, where the shrines were created and the wall paintings executed. From these early experiences, Neumann proposed, came concepts of ritual that are still with us today. Underlying all temple ritual is the idea of the mysteries that are preserved there, and of the difficult, labyrinthine journey of initiation that one must take to reach the centre. Furthermore, one needs a leader, a teacher, one who has already experienced the danger of the way since he has himself been initiated. The prototypes of these concepts Neumann found in the Upper Paleolithic caves, with the dark, dangerous journey one would have had to take to reach the interior, and the mysteries of the Great Mother that originated there.

RITUAL DRAMA IN THE TEMPLE

THE mysteries of the temple take many forms, differing from culture to culture, and are in fact in many ways culture specific, as we would expect. Two types of temple initiation, however, are particularly widespread, and these are the 'theatrical' staging of ritual performances based on the creation myths, and the initiation of the living into the knowledge and mysteries of the afterlife.

Already in 1867 the great pioneer of Egyptology, Lepsius, wrote: 'The *Book of the Dead*, or the collection of the texts relating to the resurrection, the judgment, and the life in the other world, was in its essential character a book of practical instruction. Its aim was to inform the individual, intent on his spiritual welfare, about what already on earth should be known and prepared by him for his death'.

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Thus, creation and death were the two grand themes, and it was these that informed the ritual processes of the temples and benefited the relative few who could actually gain access to them. The best-known example from ancient Egypt of a ritual drama based on a creation text is the so-called 'Theology of Memphis', the famous Shabaka Stone. Pharaoh Shabaka (716–702 BC) of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty discovered an ancient text in a temple in Memphis, a text relating the creation according to the traditions of Memphis, and its chief god, Ptah. The text gives solid evidence that it was meant to be performed, with actors (usually thought to have been priests) taking the parts of the various deities and speaking the parts assigned to them, for example, 'Words spoken by Geb to Seth', and 'Words spoken by Geb to Horus'. The story was recited and explained to the ancient audience by a lector priest.

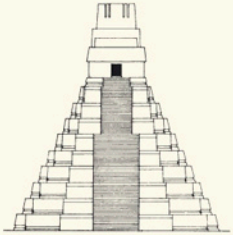
→ Image of a shrine to Osiris, the god of the afterlife, from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. Behind the seated Osiris is his wife and sister, Isis, the goddess of motherhood and nature; in front of him is a fetish to Anubis, a symbol of embalming.

THE TEMPLE'S MANY FORMS

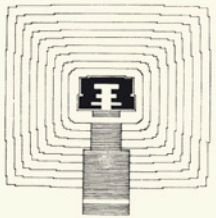
Throughout history, the urge to build temples has generated an instinctive impulse towards abstract geometry, though all its forms can be seen as in some sense originating in the primordial mound. The influence can be seen in temples all around the world, including the ziggurat at Ur (*below left*); the Shore Temple at Mamallapuram, India (*bottom left*); the temple of Tikal, Guatemala (*below right*); and the Al Azhar Mosque, Cairo (*opposite, bottom left*).

In the West, temples and churches have assumed a variety of forms, but all are recognizably religious: for example, the temple of Hephaistos at Athens (*opposite, below right*) and the stave church at Borgund, Norway (*opposite, above left*). A series of models (*opposite, above right*) reduces the forms of sacred buildings to their geometrical essentials. The Egyptian pyramid, Islamic mosque, Christian church and Greek temple can all be generated from half a dozen simple elements.

Ziggurat at Ur. Reconstructed by the archaeologist Leonard Woolley.



The 8th-century Shore Temple at Mamallapuram, India.



Section through the Maya temple of Tikal, Guatemala.

12th-century Norwegian stave church at Borgund.

A selection of temple models made by German Expressionist designer Hermann Finsterlin in 1922.

Al Azhar Mosque, Cairo. A Fatimid mosque, built in 970–72.

The best preserved of all Greek temples: the temple of Hephaistos at Athens from the mid-5th century BC.