Thus runs the popular translation of a poetic description of the New Kingdom city of Thebes. The passage in which it occurs can be translated more appropriately as follows:

Thebes is more just (mty) than all (other) cities (...). They are given the name ‘city’ under the supervision of Thebes, the Eye of Re (...). All cities are in her shadow, in order to magnify themselves through Thebes. She is the just one. (P. Leiden I 350 recto II 10–15)

Egyptologists have no trouble understanding this text, since they are familiar with the prominence of Thebes as the religious centre of Egypt during the New Kingdom. The “justness” of Thebes lies in one thing that is implicit in the above passage: its temple, or rather its network of temples dedicated to Amun-Re, the heart of which was the great complex of Ipet-sut (Karnak). Indeed, among the Amun temples of Thebes, Karnak was in its turn the “just” or “actual” one: in an inscription mainly concerned with his own memorial temple in western Thebes, Ramesses III refers to Thebes itself (i.e. east of the Nile) as “your (i.e. Amun’s) actual temple” (hw.t=k mty.t). The great old temple at Karnak is here put in contrast with the king’s new mortuary foundation at Medinet Habu. About three centuries earlier, King Thutmos III

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* I wish to thank Brian Muhs for reading a draft of this chapter, and for correcting my English.


3 KRI V, 118, 2.
even referred to the central temple of Amun within the Karnak complex as “the just (or: actual) temple of the House of Amun” (hw.t-ntr n.t pr 'Imn). The contrast made here is with one of Thutmose’s own additions to the Karnak temple: the so-called Festival Temple or šḥ-mnw.

One private inscription of the Eighteenth Dynasty indicates that the Theban temple constellation served as an example for the temples in Memphis. The high royal steward Amenhotep describes the memorial temple erected by Amenhotep III near the main temple of Ptah, and adds:

*His Majesty caused this temple to be on the endowment (sdḫ) of the temple of Ptah in all its writings, just like those temples of those kings of Upper and Lower Egypt that are beside His Father in the Southern City (i.e. Thebes).* (Inscription of the high steward Amenhotep, col. 21)

In addition to the monumental inscriptions of kings and officials and their religious settings, texts on papyrus provide indications for the prominence of the Theban temples in an administrative setting. The Great Harris Papyrus extensively enumerates the benefactions of Ramesses III for the temples of Egypt during his thirty-one-year reign. The text not only makes clear that the king’s most lavish building activity and endowments were spent on Thebes; it also shows the traditional order in which the Egyptian temples were presented in administrative documents: Thebes—Heliopolis—Memphis, followed by minor religious centres. One truly administrative document keeping to this order is the Wilbour Papyrus, a long agrarian survey from the reign of Ramesses V. The same is done in a papyrus pertaining to agrarian administration of the Third Intermediate Period.

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