

Did the Temple's vestibule have walls or not? – Notes, Peter Schmidt, 2023

This matters for the word choice in translating אֵלָם *ēlām*.

While the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place of Solomon's Temple are described in some detail, we do not read as much about the vestibule. One can come away with the impression that it was a porch with a roof, but open-sided – not really a “room”. However, that seems to be wrong. We have some indication that it was more like an entrance hall, an integral part of the building (cf. UBS *Realia Handbook* § 3.14.1.1., p. 188 “**entrance room, entrance hall**”). [The UBS *Handbook* on 1Ki 6:0 and 6:3 thinks neither of a hall nor of a proper porch, but of a “forecourt” or “unroofed structure”.]

אֵלָם *ēlām* (also spelled אֵלָם *ulām* or אֵלָם *ulām*, see HALOT) does not denote the main building of a given complex (neither with the Temple, nor with the palace). But it is not a “side chamber” either; it can be sizeable, and serve for larger events.

1Ki. 7:12 talks about the make-up of the walls of the Temple courts. In passing, it informs us that **the *ēlām* of the Temple also had such a stone wall:**

NRSV The great court had three courses of dressed stone to one layer of cedar beams all around; so had the inner court of the house of the LORD, and the vestibule of the house.

TEV The palace court, the inner court of the Temple, and the entrance room of the Temple had walls with one layer of cedar beams for every three layers of cut stones.

Another possible argument for thinking of proper buildings with walls is this: In 1Ki. 7:8 we are told that Solomon's own house was “of the same workmanship”, and the one for his wife “like this *ēlām*”. Now we do not know what these two expressions refer to – only to some aspect of how they were built, or to the overall design. If the latter, then – because the royal living quarters cannot have been “porticos” or “colonnades”, open to all sides – at least the *ēlām* that was mentioned last (the “hall of the throne / hall of judgment”) cannot have been open either. That leaves the possibility that other constructions called *ēlām* were closed as well.

In 2Chr. 29:7, Hezekiah says about the time before him (NASB):

They have also shut the doors of the porch and put out the lamps, and have not burned incense or offered burnt offerings in the holy place to the God of Israel.

If the porch had doors that could be shut to prevent access to it, it must have been a room enclosed by walls.

In Ezekiel's Temple, the six gatehouses each have an *ēlām*, and so does the Temple building. Regarding the gatehouses, Ezek. 40:16 says (ESVUS16):

The vestibule had windows all around inside, and on the jambs were palm trees.

Even if one reads “niches” (with Block, NICOT, 1998) instead of “windows” – either way, this presupposes walls, as does the mention of “jambs”.

As to the Temple's vestibule, Ezek. 41:15-16 is difficult to interpret, but it seems to say that it was paneled, which assumes it had walls (ESVUS16):

... The inside of the nave and the vestibules of the court, ¹⁶ the thresholds and the narrow windows and the galleries all around the three of them, opposite the threshold, were paneled with wood all around, from the floor up to the windows.

Translation: The word for *ēlām* in the receptor language should not suggest a porch only, open to several sides; an equivalent for “vestibule” comes closer.