



Introduction to the Temple of Karnak

The general layout and pylons

A number of important ancient cities and temples are known from ancient Egypt. One of the most famous cities is Thebes, a major religious center and the burial place of the kings of the New Kingdom. The city's tombs, including the Valley of the Kings and Queens, are located on the west bank of the river Nile, in the area's limestone cliffs. The mortuary temples of many of the New Kingdom kings edge the flood plain of the Nile.

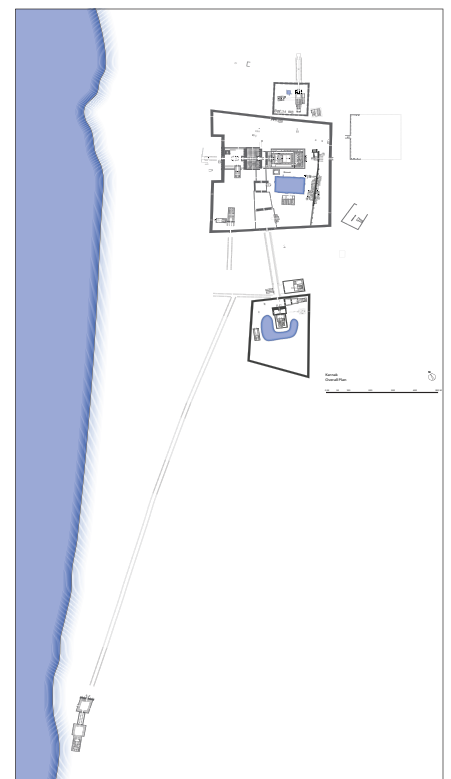
The houses and workshops of the ancient Thebans were located on the river's east bank. Little remains of the ancient city, as it is covered by the modern city of Luxor. A series of important temples, composing the religious heart of Thebes, are most of what remains today. To the south, close to the banks of the Nile, lies the temple of Luxor. To the north and connected by the sphinx alleyway, stand the temples of Karnak. Karnak can be divided into four sections: south Karnak, with its temple of the goddess Mut, east Karnak, the location of a temple to the Aten, north Karnak, the site of the temple of the god Montu, and central Karnak, with its temple to the god Amun.

The Temple of Amun-Ra at Karnak

The temple of Amun at Karnak is made up of a series of separate structures and features that combine to form one huge building complex.

Arriving at the temple, the worshiper passed the ceremonial tribune and proceeded down a sphinx-lined alleyway. Extending out from the west side of the temple towards the Nile, this would have been the main temple entrance from the 22nd Dynasty onwards.

Before entering the temple, one passed through a monumental stone pylon. This structure, called the first pylon, was actually the last one built at the temple. The temple was divided into sections by a series of nine more pylons, ten in total, creating an east/west axis, as well as a north/south axis. The pylons today are counted from the west to the east (pylons 1-6) and then from the north to the south (pylons 7-10). This numbering system does not represent the order of construction, as the earliest temple buildings are located behind the sixth pylon, and the temple expanded outward through time from this core area.



Map showing the location of the temple complex of Karnak and Luxor Temple (to the far south).

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Once past the first pylon, the visitor stood in one of the temple courtyards. This open-air court, which includes a colonnade and encloses a number of smaller structures, is called the “first court.”

The first court led through the second pylon and into the hypostyle hall. The hall has a central raised nave and is supported by a veritable forest of sandstone columns. Its rear wall originally stood independently as the third pylon.

Moving into the heart of the temple, one passed a series of tall stone obelisks. Each of these four-sided columns was carved from a single piece of granite and placed at various important areas within and outside the temple.

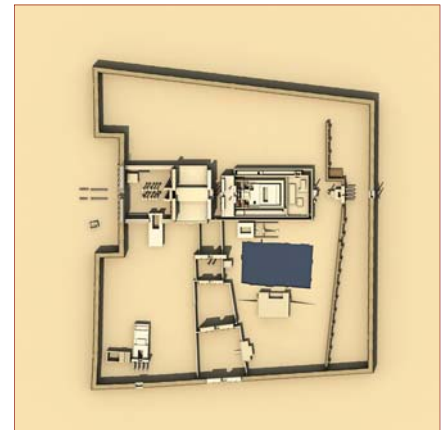
The heart of Karnak lies in its sanctuary. It is here, in the central-most part of the building, where the statue of the god Amun-Ra would have been housed and where the temple’s “daily ritual” took place. The god’s image was stored within a stone naos or shrine. The surrounding sanctuary would have also held rooms for the storage of important and valuable cult equipment.

Karnak’s sacred lake graces the southern side of the temple. This pool supplied water for cult purposes and served as the location for special rituals with the god’s bark.

To the south, the Karnak pylons create another main route to the temple. This is its southern axis. This axis was important for the temple’s participation in festivals and processions. This route led to the temple of the goddess Mut in south Karnak, and it also connects Karnak with the temple of Luxor.

Surrounding the temple and its many secondary buildings and shrines is an enclosure wall. Made of layer upon layer of mud brick, the wall defined and protected the sacred space from the profane.

Huge stone gateways puncture the enclosure at a number of places along the wall. These gates provided access to the different axis routes and temples within the Karnak precinct. Gates would have been equipped with wooden doors, controlling the access to different parts of the precinct and the temple proper. Many areas of the temple would have been open only to temple priests.



A model rendering of an overhead view of Karnak from 30 BCE. The east-west and north-south axes can be seen.

The history of the temple and city and its importance in Egyptian history

The history of the temple of Karnak reflects the greater national religious and political history of Egypt. Struggles over the country's rule, the waxing and waning of Egypt's international power, and religious innovation and conservatism are all inscribed into the very matrix of the temple. In some cases, Karnak's temples hold important and unique evidence that historians use to reconstruct political, religious and military history. By understanding the different phases and changes in the temple of Amun-Ra, we can learn to better understand the history of the country as a whole.

The Old Kingdom city of Thebes

The city of Thebes played a large role in the rise to prominence of the Karnak temples. At the start of the Old Kingdom, Thebes appears to have been merely a small provincial town. By the end of the 4th Dynasty, *Waset*, the ancient name of the city, stood for the whole of the area in Upper Egypt around it – suggesting it held the prominent position in the region.¹

Small sections of the domestic parts of Old Kingdom Thebes have been positively identified to the east of the present Amun temple enclosure, and tombs for some of Thebes' inhabitants from the late Old Kingdom have been found on the west bank at the sites of el Khokha, el Tarif, and the Asasif. These burials included mud brick mastabas and small rock-cut tombs of the rulers of the Theban "nome," or region.²

The chapel of ancestors in the *Akhmenu* festival hall had a series of relief scenes depicting kings that Thutmose III, the king who built that structure, considered as his "ancestors." Four rulers of the mid-Old Kingdom and one other whose name was destroyed are listed in this relief. Some Egyptologists interpret this depiction as a record of kings who contributed constructions to the earliest temple of Amun.³ A statue of the Old Kingdom king Niuserra, found in excavations at Karnak in the early 1900s, also suggests a tie between the Amun temple and the Old Kingdom.⁴ Some scholars suggest that the earliest form of the temple would have dated back to the 3rd or 4th Dynasty, the initial period in the ascension of Thebes.⁵

Karnak in the First Intermediate Period

The first hard evidence for the existence of the Theban temple of Amun dates to what Egyptologists call the First Intermediate Period, when rule of Egypt splintered into regional areas of governance. Thebes became a powerful political center with the rise of the Intef family, who made Thebes the center of their

- 1 Polz 2001
- 2 Polz 2001
- 3 Lauffray 1979: 45
- 4 Ullmann 2007: 3
- 5 Lauffray 1979: 45

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activities, while the northern part of the country was ruled by the successors of the Old Kingdom from the city of Herakleopolis Magna.⁶ It is during the period of royal ambition and display in the 11th Dynasty that king Intef II erected a small mud brick temple, probably with a stone columned portico, on the east bank for the god Amun-Ra. A sandstone column found reused in a later building at Karnak includes an inscription dedicated by that king. As well, a series of small sandstone platforms, no larger than 10m by 10m, were discovered along the west side of the later “Middle Kingdom court.” It is possible that this was the location of the original temple and portico of Intef II. Eleventh Dynasty king Nebhepetra Mentuhotep II may have extended or rebuilt the temple on the same location.⁷

The rise of Karnak’s national importance was guaranteed by the success of the Intef family against the Herakleopolitan region. Led by Intef II, the Theban family moved northward, confronting the northern nomes in a series of military battles.⁸ The family’s eventual victory launched another era of political unity, the so-called the Middle Kingdom. Thebes briefly stood as the country’s capital.⁹ While it lost its political importance soon after when the capital was moved to the north of Egypt, it retained its cachet as the home of the ruling family. Karnak temple, as one of the favored cult locales of the Thebans, must have been inextricably linked with this military success.

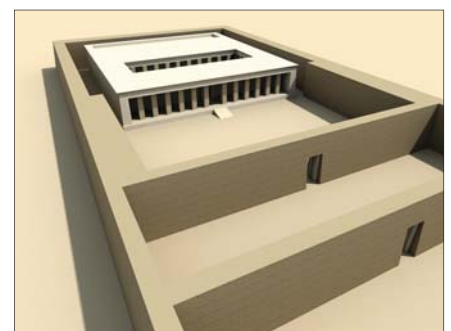
Karnak of the Middle Kingdom

Senusret I, second king of the powerful 12th Dynasty, must have decided that the god who had led his predecessors to victory deserved a more elaborate temple than that left by the Intefs. On the site of the 11th Dynasty buildings (and possibly a phase dated to Amenemhat I, the king before him), he erected a large limestone temple, pierced by four doorways with red granite thresholds.¹⁰ It may have been much larger than the earlier temples, with the core building covering 40m by 40m, and it was fronted by an impressive portico of square pillars with statues of the king in the pose of the god Osiris.¹¹

Because of later rebuilding, little is known about the city surrounding Karnak in the Middle Kingdom. Excavations to the southeast of the Middle Kingdom temple have uncovered some urban areas of the period. The town at that time has been estimated to have encompassed 500,000 square meters and followed a rigid grid layout, like many other planned cities of that period.¹²

Thebes of the Second Intermediate Period

After the unity of the Middle Kingdom had broken down into areas of regional rule, the area around Thebes again rose to prominence as a center of southern power in the Second Intermediate Period. The Theban nomarchs, later named



Above: a model rendering of the Middle Kingdom temple complex.

Below: photograph of the red granite thresholds. Located in the background is the *Akhmenu*, not the Middle Kingdom Court (now completely destroyed).



- 6 Seidlmayer 2000
- 7 Ullmann 2007
- 8 Seidlmayer 2000
- 9 Callender 2000
- 10 Gabolde 1999
- 11 Gabolde 1998; Ullmann 2007
- 12 Kemp 2006: 227, 265

the 17th Dynasty, conflicted with the major northern power centered at Avaris, in the eastern Delta. The northern rulers, the Hyksos, were an ethnically western Asian people who had settled in the Delta region at the end of the Middle Kingdom. War between the southerners and the Hyksos lasted more than thirty years, and spanned the reign of three Theban kings.¹³ Little is known about the building activities at Karnak at this time, although the existence of statuary, stelae, and other cultic objects from the 17th Dynasty show that interest in the temple of Amun-Ra was renewed.¹⁴ The Thebans achieved final victory under king Ahmose, who probably sponsored new building projects at Karnak.¹⁵ That Thebes had again prevailed in the civil warfare bolstered the reputation of the god, and his temple at Karnak began a golden age of construction and expansion under the reunified state of the New Kingdom.

Karnak in the early New Kingdom

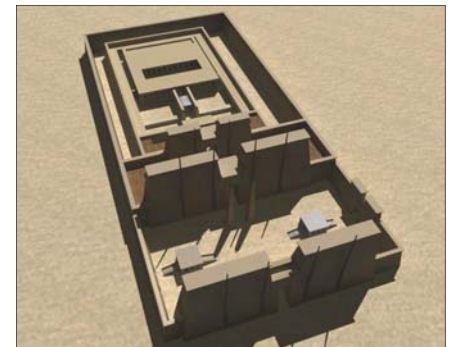
With the advent of the New Kingdom, great changes were made to the city of Thebes as the once modest temple complexes underwent major expansions. The temples were now viewed as a means to display the wealth and legitimacy of the increasingly rich and powerful pharaohs.¹⁶ Thebes seemingly was “evacuated and leveled” in the early 18th Dynasty to construct a flat platform for the elaboration of the ever-growing temples.¹⁷ The vastly expanding city was then built on unoccupied ground outside the old city area.

Thebes’ history as seat of the 17th Dynasty and home of the powerful god Amun-Ra awarded it a special status, even after the capital of the country again moved to the north at Memphis. Kings and elite administrators chose to site their burials in the hills on the west bank of the river, not far from the tombs of the 11th and 17th Dynasty Theban rulers. Karnak became one of the most important temples in all of Egypt, and the 18th Dynasty rulers began a series of embellishments to the temple that grew ever more ambitious.

Additions to the core Middle Kingdom temple by Amenhotep I, Thutmose I and Thutmose II extended the temple to the west and created new cult spaces. Politically, Karnak took on new significance, as the pharaohs began to use the temple as a means of demonstrating their ordained selection as king by the gods. Coronation rituals now took place in the columned hall of Thutmose I, with the god Amun sanctioning the choice.¹⁸

Hatshepsut and Thutmose III

Dynastic dramas played out within Karnak’s halls, as a king’s imagery in the cultic space was seen as directly linked to his memory and legitimacy. Rulers who had fallen from grace could literally be “excised” from history, and the erasures



The Amun precinct during the reign of Thutmose II.

- 13 Bourriau 2000
- 14 Polz 2007: 77-81, 374-375
- 15 Bryan 2000
- 16 Kozloff and Bryan 1992: 73, 82-104
- 17 Kemp 1991: 201
- 18 Golvin and Goyon 1987: 44

and modifications tell the story of those who rose and fell spectacularly from power.

One such case is that of the 18th Dynasty queen Hatshepsut, wife and half-sister of king Thutmose II and daughter of king Thutmose I. The queen acted as regent for her husband's heir, Thutmose III (a son of the king by a secondary wife), when pharaoh died and left the child the throne. Reliefs and statuary from Karnak and other temples show that she waited no more than seven years to proclaim herself pharaoh, assigning herself royal titulary and representing herself in image as a male king.¹⁹ She built extensively at Karnak, adding the eighth pylon, erecting at least two obelisks and a series of papyri-form columns in her father's remodeled columned hall (the *Wadjet* hall), raising another pair of monoliths on the eastern side of the temple, and remodeling part of the Middle Kingdom temple of Senusret I for the addition of a series of rooms around the innermost temple shrine, her "palace of *Ma'at*." When the queen died, Thutmose III regained his crown and sat alone on the throne for thirty-two years. Some time after the king's sole reign began, Hatshepsut's constructions at Thebes were changed, defaced, destroyed, or covered up.²⁰

At Karnak, this process included the erasure of relief scenes of the queen on the eighth pylon, destruction of reliefs in the series of rooms she built in the center of the temple (the "palace of *Ma'at*"), the bricking in of the base of her obelisks in the *Wadjet* hall, and the dismantling and defacing of the queen's central bark shrine, the "red chapel." Evidence of all these changes can still be seen at Karnak today.

Many historians have interpreted these modifications as examples of the final revenge of Thutmose III against the hated aunt who had co-opted his throne. However, the altered and covered scenes of Hatshepsut from the "palace of *Ma'at*" at Karnak have provided Egyptologists with a valuable clue regarding when the campaign against the queen began. A wall built by Thutmose III covering a mutilated scene of the queen describes events of the king's forty-second regnal year (the king counted his reign from the death of his father, as if Hatshepsut's reign was his own). This piece of evidence from Karnak shows that Thutmose III did not begin his proscription against the image and name of Hatshepsut until nearly twenty years after her death. Instead of being motivated by revenge, it may have therefore been linked to the succession of Amenhotep II, or possibly just a "covering up" of what the king now decided set a bad precedent – allowing women to wield unchecked power.²¹ In either case, the Karnak temple served as the main locus for "re-writing" history, showing the importance of this structure in royal presentation.

See the essay on Temple Development for a more detailed discussion of changes made to Hatshepsut's monuments at Karnak.



A destroyed image of Hatshepsut from the "Palace of *Ma'at*." Her image was destroyed during the reign of Thutmose III. Many of her monuments suffered the same fate.

19 Keller 2005

20 Arnold, Dorothea 2005; Dorman 2005

21 Dorman 2005

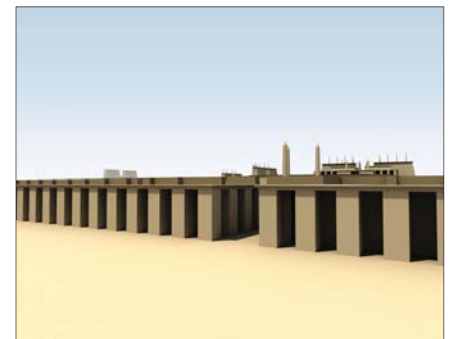
The political controversy of Hatshepsut's reign did not affect the prominence of the temple. Kings continued to support the temple financially, sponsoring new construction and expansion. Amenhotep II and Thutmose IV embellished the existing temple courts and halls with new buildings, such as the latter's pillared peristyle added to the jubilee court of Thutmose II. Later, Amenhotep III revamped the western entrance by tearing it down and replacing it with the third pylon.

The Amarna Period

Karnak played a significant role in another dramatic episode in Egyptian history, the "Amarna Period." The temple and its main god Amun-Ra had grown even richer since the reign of Thutmose III, as he and his 18th Dynasty successors had variously campaigned successfully in the Levant and Nubia, depositing much captured wealth in the temple coffers.²² When pharaoh Amenhotep III died, he left his son, Amenhotep IV, a country richer than ever before, with far-flung international influence and control.²³ The new king began his reign continuing the projects of his father at Karnak, in the traditional Egyptian style.²⁴

But Amenhotep IV had become extremely devoted to the cult of a solar god, the Aten, who had appeared as a form of the sun god Ra-Horakhty under the reign of Amenhotep III. The new king promoted the Aten's existence as a separate and unique deity, and changed the form of this sun god to a completely non-anthropomorphic image of a round disc with rays extending out and ending in hands.²⁵ In the third year of his reign, he threw himself a *sed*-festival, a grand jubilee ceremony that kings customarily celebrated once they had completed thirty years of rule. New buildings were erected at Karnak for the occasion, one of which, the *Gem-pa-Aten* (the only one whose location is confirmed), was located outside of the Amun temple walls in east Karnak.²⁶ The remarkable thing about these structures was their decoration: the Aten's name and titles were encircled in a cartouche, a symbol used traditionally to designate the king, and the god was mentioned as celebrating the *sed* festival, as if the Aten were king.²⁷ Huge statues of the Amenhotep IV and the queen, Nefertiti, lined the courtyard of the main festival temple – but these were unlike any royal statues seen before. Traditionally, the king was depicted with an athletic and idealized body, but at Karnak, the king's image had a protruding belly, an elongated face, a narrow, high waist, and a thick, lush mouth. Relief scenes from this and other Karnak structures showed a bizarre new aesthetic as well, with elongated and exaggerated bodies and faces of all the royal family members.²⁸ The king and his family were presented in unprecedented ways, including scenes depicting the private moments of royal domestic life in the palace.²⁹

See the essay on Temple Development for a more detailed discussion of Akhenaten's monuments at Karnak.



A model rendering of the *Gem-pa-Aten*, located east of the Amun precinct in Karnak.

- 22 Bryan 2005
- 23 Kozloff and Bryan 1992
- 24 Redford 1984: 62
- 25 Robins 1997: 149
- 26 Redford 1984: 63
- 27 Robins 1997: 149
- 28 Arnold, Dorothea 1996
- 29 Redford 1984: 116-121

Amenhotep IV must have been unhappy with the results of attempts to integrate the Aten cult into Thebes, the long-standing home of Amun. Until this point, he seems to have promoted the religion of the Aten without detriment to the other gods of the country. But in his fifth regnal year, he changed his name from Amenhotep (“Amun is at peace”) to Akhenaten (“effective spirit of the Aten”) and launched a fervent attack on the existence of gods other than the Aten.³⁰ Amun was a special target, and his name and figure was cut out of temples all over Egypt, including at his important center of Karnak.³¹

Shortly after, the king decided to leave the city of Thebes, and move the center of cult, the royal residence, and his burial site to a completely virgin area in Middle Egypt, a city he named Akhetaten (modern day Tell el-Amarna). The wealth of the Amun temple at Karnak was diverted to building projects for the new city. The temple itself was closed.³²

The new city and new religion were short-lived. A few years after the death of Akhenaten, the boy king Tutankhaten (“the living image of the Aten”) changed his name to Tutankhamun (“the living image of Amun”) and regenerated the cults in the temples of Amun, Ptah, and other gods. By the third year of his reign, Tutankhamun had moved the national capital back to Memphis, its traditional New Kingdom location, and while he sponsored the worship of the Aten at Thebes and other centers, he also actively supported the old cults.³³

Outside of the city of Akhetaten itself, the aftermath of the Amarna Period is most visible at Karnak. After the death of Tutankhamun and the short reign of his steward Aye, a popular general named Horemheb came to the throne. He launched an assault against the Aten, closing all its temples nation-wide. At Karnak, within the first ten years of his reign, he ordered Akhenaten’s buildings pulled apart block-by-block to be reused as fill in the foundations and fill of his own building projects at the second, ninth, and tenth pylons. Any imagery of Akhenaten remaining inside the precinct walls was defaced or covered up.³⁴ Horemheb ordered the recarving of much of the statuary and monuments of Tutankhamun and Aye in his own name, despite the fact these kings dedicated the pieces to the traditional gods.³⁵

The backlash continued under the rulers of the newly formed 19th Dynasty, and the Amarna kings (all the rulers between Amenhotep III and Horemheb) were deleted from the king-lists, and all memory of the Akhenaten and those associated with him was systematically eradicated.³⁶ The name and face of Amun and any other gods who had been carved out or covered up by Akhenaten were repaired throughout the country, and these recarved cartouches and figures are visible all over Karnak, small mementos of this turbulent period.

- 30 Allen 1996
- 31 Redford 1984: 139-142
- 32 Redford 1984: 137-142
- 33 Redford 1984: 206-222
- 34 Redford 1984: 220-227
- 35 Robins 1997: 159-162
- 36 Redford 1984: 225-231

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Karnak in the mid and late New Kingdom

A new ruling dynasty, administering the country from Egypt's capital in the north, took control with the reign of Ramesses I. Karnak was again favored with lavish royal patronage, most significantly with the great hypostyle hall of Sety I. The king and his son, Ramesses II, decorated the giant new hall, adding beautifully carved ritual scenes inside and monumental battle reliefs on its exterior.

From the 19th Dynasty onward, a special emphasis at Karnak was placed on depicting the great military victories of the kings.³⁷ While the episodes they represent may not fit into our modern definition of historical documents, they do provide Egyptologists with valuable information on foreign relations during these periods.

The north exterior wall of the great hypostyle hall includes scenes of Sety I in a successful attack against a fortress of the *Pekanan* peoples, a march through the desert, the vanquishing of the *Yanoam* people, and an archery battle against the *Kheta*. These acts are piously followed by Sety I offering the spoils of war to the Theban gods Amun, Mut and Khonsu.³⁸

On the hall's south wall, Ramesess II included scenes of his own military triumphs against the Assyrians and Hittites.

These battle scenes probably reflect more of the myth of the conquering pharaoh than an account of any one historical event. However, the names of the nations or tribes with which the king clashed show what groups the Egyptians of the time were in contact and conflict with, information that is rarely available from other sources.

At the end of the 19th and the start of the 20th Dynasties, construction continued at Karnak unabated. Sety II and Ramesses III built temples and shrines west and south of the Amun temple proper. However, Egypt soon experienced a series of invasions or migrations of a displaced group of unknown origin referred to as the "sea people." Ramesses III initially had success repelling the intruders, but continuing conflict with these groups, as well as with Libyan peoples encroaching in the western Nile Delta, eventually caused major destabilization within the nation. The wealth and power of the kings declined, and the later Ramesside kings could little afford to sponsor expensive projects at Karnak. Ramesses IX managed to fund the erection of a gate along the entrance to the southern processional path, but by the reign of Ramesses XI, the kings had lost any real control over the southern part of the country, and Egypt split into regional factions of rule.³⁹



Battle scenes showing Sety I fighting the *Pekanan* and *Kheta* peoples.



Battle scenes showing Ramesses II fighting against the Assyrians and Hittites.

- 37 Brand 2007
- 38 Schwaller de Lubicz 1999: 553-562
- 39 Van Dijk 2000; Vandorpe 1995:

Karnak in the early Third Intermediate Period

Egypt was a greatly changed nation after the end of the New Kingdom, as the country was effectively broken into shifting sectors of regional control. In the 21st Dynasty, although in theory the country was still a single unit, Karnak was under the control of a series of “high priests of Amun” who ruled all of Middle Egypt and the south, while kings based out of Tanis in the Delta governed the northern part of the nation.⁴⁰

Its resources limited, Karnak temple underwent no great constructions projects at this time. However, one of these high priests, Pinedjem I, moved a number of sphinxes from other temple sites in Thebes to Karnak. The sphinxes were placed along the western entrance to the temple, as well as along the festival procession route leading out from the Khonsu temple, built by Ramesses III.⁴¹

Most significant at this time was the new belief that elevated the god Amun to the role of Egypt’s “supreme political authority.”⁴² Legitimacy for all rulers and for all decisions came through the god himself. Amun-Ra was now regularly consulted through oracles at Karnak and Tanis, the center of the god’s cult in the north.

Libyan peoples, who had been moving into the western Delta for a number of years, rose to prominence in the Third Intermediate Period, eventually taking the throne in the north as the 22nd Dynasty. Pharaoh Shoshenq I, who was also a “great chief of the *Meshwesh*” Libyans, tried to reunify Egypt under centralized rule. He brought southern Egypt back under crown control by appointing his own son to the post of high priest of Amun in Thebes. During his reign, a new colonnaded entrance court to the temple was constructed, enclosing the earlier, 20th Dynasty bark stations of Ramesses III and Sety II on the temple’s western side.

While Egypt’s prestige in the world had waned during the 20th and 21st Dynasties, Shoshenq I renewed the nation’s military power and launched an expedition into the Levant. An inscribed text and scene on the southern door of his new court at Karnak (the “Bubastite Portal”) records this event, listing the names of the towns in southern Palestine that were part of his campaign.⁴³ The Karnak text plays an important role in understanding international relations in the Near East at the time, and its historicity is supported by mention of the king’s incursion in the Hebrew Bible (I Kings 14:25, II Chronicles 12:2).⁴⁴

The unity of Shoshenq’s government eventually broke down, and within one hundred years of his death, a confusing series of rulers sprang up, managing various parts of the nation. While the last “kings” of the 22nd Dynasty were still centered at Tanis, others ruled from Thebes, Hermopolis, Herakleopolis, Leontopolis and Sais.⁴⁵



Part of the Shoshenq I Court. The sphinxes may have been moved here during the reign of Taharqo.

204-205

40 Fazzini 1988

41 Arnold, Dieter 1999: 30; Cabrol 1995, 2001

42 Taylor 2000

43 Taylor 2000

44 Survey 1954: vii-viii, pls. 2-9

45 Taylor 2000

Karnak in the late Third Intermediate Period

The 25th Dynasty brought another first to Egypt – rule by the kings of Kush from Nubia. The Kushite kings seem to have capitalized on Egypt’s weakness in the period of fragmented rule that characterized the end of the 22nd, 23rd and 24th Dynasties. The first few Kushite kings pressed north into Egypt, gaining control of some territories, but eventually returning back to their home base in Nubia. It was up to Shabaqo to actually gain the permanent allegiance of the mini-dynasts ruling in multiple sections of the country.⁴⁶

The Kushite kings were devotees of many of the traditional Egyptian gods, especially Amun. Karnak played an important role in their efforts to legitimize their rule by visibly demonstrating their piety and deep understanding of Egyptian culture. King Taharqo reinvigorated construction at Karnak, mostly stagnant since the beginning of the 22nd Dynasty, building a monumental kiosk in the Amun temple’s first court, a cultic structure and a stepped well bordering the sacred lake, and a series of colonnades at the temples of Amun, Mut and Khonsu.

Political developments of the Third Intermediate Period included a renewal of the Theban office of “god’s wife of Amun,” a title that had taken on great importance in the start of the 18th Dynasty, but had declined after the reign of Hatshepsut. Priestesses who held this role were usually daughters of the ruling king, and they controlled a large and wealthy estate with attached personnel. The rising power of this priestess in the Theban area can easily be seen at Karnak, where a number of chapels dedicated to and by the “god’s wives” were built. These prominent women are shown in situations previously reserved for the queen, and in certain instances, performing cultic acts usually restricted to the pharaoh. These relief scenes suggest the “god’s wives” held considerable political power in the Theban area. Their significance continued unabated into the 26th Dynasty, despite the change in rulership.⁴⁷

Religious trends during the Third Intermediate Period included the rise in the importance of the funerary god Osiris. To the northeast of the Amun Temple proper, a number of small temples and chapels dedicated to that god can be found, some of them dedicated by the “god’s wives.” A vaulted brick “tomb of Osiris” in this area seems to be a precursor to the “Osiris catacombs” (mentioned below) built during the Ptolemaic Period at Karnak.⁴⁸

Late Period Karnak

The 25th Dynasty ended with Assyrian invasions of Egypt, pushing the Kushite kings south back into Nubia. A family from one of the ruling kinglets at Sais in the north of the country was assigned to rule locally for the Assyrians, but quickly the foreigners lost their hold over the country and the Saite princes pushed their power outward, eventually unifying Egypt under their rule. A series



One of the many shrines of the “God’s Wife of Amun” located at Karnak.

46 Fazzini 1988

47 Fazzini 1988; Taylor 2000

48 Leclère 1996; Leclère and Coulon 1998

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of other Egyptian dynasts ruled the country during the 29th and 30th Dynasties, broken by a brief interlude of Persian rule in the 27th Dynasty. Only limited building activity took place at Karnak during this period, as the focus of the nation turned northward.

The 30th Dynasty saw the last great moments of native rule in Egypt, although the country became increasingly unstable.⁴⁹ Nectanebo I, the founder of the dynasty, clearly held great command of resources in the nation, as he ordered giant new enclosure walls to encircle Karnak's Amun, Mut and Montu Temples. These walls greatly expanded the temple precincts, bringing new land into the sacred space of the temple enclosures.

Karnak under the Rule of the Macedonians and Greek Ptolemies

Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 BCE as part of his march across the Mediterranean and the Near East. Less than ten years later, Alexander was dead and his brother, Philip Arrhidaeus, took the throne. Despite only holding the crown for five years, Arrhidaeus managed to have a much greater visual impact at Karnak than his more famous brother: he built or decorated a granite bark shrine for the god Amun, a structure that still graces the center of the temple today.

Alexander's empire was eventually broken up into separate kingdoms, one of which – Egypt – was won by a military general named Ptolemy. Ptolemy and his successors ruled Egypt until defeated by Rome in 30 BCE. While this period was one of great social and economic change, the Ptolemies were careful to patronize the traditional Egyptian temples and to adopt the appropriate visual image of Egyptian pharaoh. They spread their wealth all over the country, endowing old cults and building impressive new temples in an innovative, but Egyptian style. The Ptolemies joined the cult of the god at the temple with a new cult to their own ancestors, writing the ruling family directly into traditional Egyptian royal ancestor worship.⁵⁰

At Karnak, Ptolemaic additions, renewals, and re-buildings are quite common. The monumental gateway on the southern side of the temple, known by its later Arabic name *Bab el-Amara*, was lavishly decorated by Ptolemy III. Its relief scenes show the Greek king in typical Egyptian style, offering to Amun, Khonsu, Mut, and other traditional deities.

One especially interesting structure from this period was the "Osiris catacombs," built under Ptolemy IV. Composed of a series of vaulted mud brick corridors, this structure included hundreds of small niches for the placement of statuettes of the funerary deity Osiris. These catacombs were located in an area of Karnak focused on the commemoration of this god since the Third Intermediate period, and possibly even earlier in the New Kingdom.⁵¹



The mud brick enclosure walls of Nectanebo I.



The Philip Arrhidaeus central bark shrine.

49 Lloyd 2000

50 Finnestad 1997

51 Leclère 1996; Leclère and Coulon 1998

Ptolemy III and Ptolemy VIII contributed to the completion of the temple of Opet, a building started or continued by Nectanebo I of the 30th Dynasty. Much of the construction and decoration of the temple was finished under Ptolemy VIII,⁵² who also embellished the temple of “Amun-who-hears-prayers” in east Karnak.⁵³ All of these projects, in which the Ptolemaic kings honored and renewed the existing cult areas of Karnak, demonstrate the continuity of religious practice in the Ptolemaic era.

The Function of the Temple and the Gods Amun, Mut, and Khonsu

Temple Function

In the Egyptian language, the Temple of Amun is usually referred to as *Per-Amun*, or “the house of Amun.” In many ways, the temple indeed played the role of the god’s abode on earth. Here, the god’s statue was provided daily with food, drink, and sweet smelling incense and oils. On special occasions, including many annual festivals, a god’s statue would leave his or her “house” and travel to visit cult temples in other locations. At Karnak, this included a number of festivals linking the temples of Amun, Mut, and Khonsu with Luxor on the east bank and Medinat Habu, Deir el-Bahiri, and other temples dedicated to the cults of the pharaohs on the west side of the river.

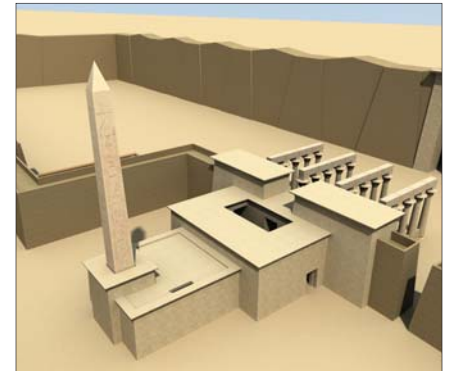
See the essay on Daily Ritual for more information on the service of the god’s statue

See the essay on Festival Processions for maps and explanations of many of the festivals

But the god’s house was much more than a mere dwelling; it also included an estate – both around the temple and in other parts of the country – that supplied it with resources. While much of the land around the Karnak temples has not yet been excavated, storehouses, aviaries, production centers for food and drink, animal slaughter areas, and homes for priests have been uncovered, showing that the temples managed a system of production and consumption for its own goods and services. Documents from a variety of periods show that the Amun temple was also involved in a larger, regional network of land ownership and taxation that brought in a substantial amount of wealth to the temple.

The gods Amun, Mut, and Khonsu

Egyptian deities, who were imagined as adult male, adult female, and child gods, were often associated into small “families” of three. The god Amun, the god to whom much of central Karnak was dedicated, was linked in the Egyptian panthe-



Ptolemy VIII enclosed the unique obelisk of Thutmose IV as part of the “Amun-who-hears-prayers” temple.

52 Arnold, Dieter 1999: 164, 197
53 Barguet 1962: 228-240

on with the goddess Mut and their son, the god Khonsu. Mut, whose name in the Hieroglyphic alphabet was spelled with a sign for the vulture, was often depicted wearing a distinctive headdress with the vulture's wings covering her hair. She was also commonly shown with the "double-crown" of Egypt – a crown linking the symbols of Upper and Lower Egypt into one headgear. Khonsu, associated with the moon, usually wore a crown with a crescent and moon disk. He could be depicted both as a child, wearing the side ponytail that marked childhood in Egyptian society, or he could alternatively appear with the head of a falcon. Amun, the "hidden one," most often wore a flat-topped headdress with two tall plumes. However, he was also combined, or syncretized, with other Egyptian gods, such as Ra-Horakhty (as Amun-Ra) or Min (as Amun-Min), and in these cases, Amun can be shown with many of the visual markers of those gods.

The role of the king at the temple

The king was the most important person in all of Egypt. Not only did he command the country as its administrative and military leader, but he also acted as the official head of state religion. The king maintained this special position with the gods and their temples for good reason – he was considered the link between the world of man and the divine. He governed Egypt in early history as the son of the god, but from the First Intermediate Period onwards increasingly as the chosen representative of the gods on earth.⁵⁴ Visually, this was expressed through statuary and relief by depicting the king in poses of close contact with the gods – where the king is shown being embraced or touched, making offerings, and receiving symbols of divine support. The king was envisioned in religious texts as becoming divine after his death, joining the other Egyptian gods in their cycles of rejuvenation and daily rebirth.⁵⁵

Because of his special connection with the gods and his latent divinity, the pharaoh served as the hypothetical "high priest" in every cult of the land. He portrayed himself in this role on the walls of the temples that he commissioned or decorated. In theory, the king would have served the god during the many rituals performed for his or her statue in the cult temple each day. In actuality, priests of each temple filled in for the king, performing his role all over the country.

See the essay on Daily Ritual for more information on the king's role in the service to the god.



Ramesses II (center) holds the hands of the gods Montu (left) and Atum (right).

54 Redford 1995: 165

55 Silverman 1995: 62-63

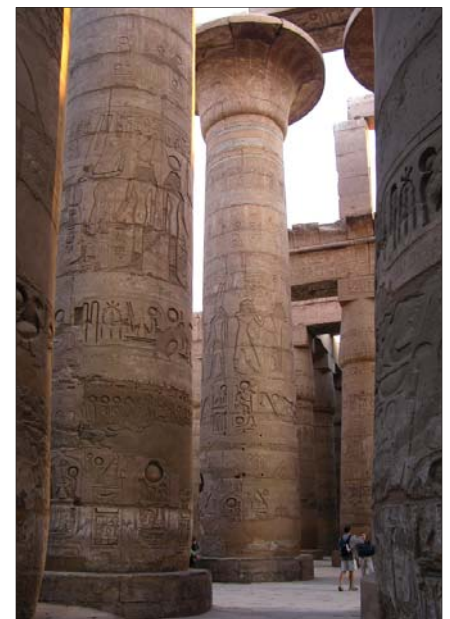
Discovery and excavation history of Karnak

Karnak and its early visitors (Greek and Roman tourists and authors)

The ancient Greeks and Romans considered Egypt the source of the world's oldest and most mysterious culture. The Greeks believed that many of their own religious and cultural features stemmed from early Egyptian cults and wisdom, and Greek authors traveled across the Mediterranean to record the customs and knowledge of this exotic place.⁵⁶ The city of Thebes (and probably the Karnak temple complex with its many monumental pylons and gateways) was famously mentioned in the 8th or 9th century BCE epic poem *The Iliad*. Homer described "Egyptian Thebes" as: "the richest city in the whole world, for it has a hundred gates through each of which two hundred men may drive at once with their chariots and horses."⁵⁷ Herodotus, writing in the 5th century, claimed to have traveled to Thebes and observed many of the practices of the priests of Zeus, the Greek god with whom he equated the Egyptian Amun.⁵⁸ It is possible, therefore, that he stood within the great courts of Amun-Ra at Karnak. The first volume of Diodorus Siculus' 1st century BCE *Library of History* focused on Egypt. That author described what is presumably the Amun temple of Karnak as: "noteworthy both in size and grace; for it is thirteen *stades* [606.7 feet] in circuit and forty-five cubits high, with courtyard walls twenty-four feet thick. This scale of magnificence was matched by its style of decoration, which was astounding for its expense and outstanding in point of craftsmanship."⁵⁹ Strabo, writing about one century later, commented on the city and her "great number of temples," although his description focused primarily on the remains of the mortuary temples and tombs on Thebes' west bank.⁶⁰

Many regular Greeks and Romans are known to have traveled to Thebes as tourists as well, stopping to marvel at Karnak temple's great hypostyle hall, or visiting the pair of colossal statues of Amenhotep III at his ruined mortuary temple on the west bank (known to the Romans as the "colossi of Memnon," a Homeric hero).⁶¹ As today, Thebes was a popular location on the tourist route in ancient times, and many foreign visitors scratched their names or comments on the Egyptian structures at which they marveled.⁶² This graffiti not only documents which buildings the curious tourists visited, but the scrawled comments often attest to the participation of these travelers in cult activities at the temple sites, such as consultation of oracles or analysis of dreams.⁶³

While ancient Egyptian culture and its monuments were still of major interest to the medieval Arab writers of the 7th through 16th centuries CE,⁶⁴ only one textual mention of the ruins at Thebes has been identified from this time period. A 13th century traveler named Abu Saleh conducted a pilgrimage to Egypt's churches and monasteries, and he reported visiting Luxor's ruined monuments.⁶⁵ It appears that most of the world, however, had forgotten the wonders of an-



Modern visitors in the hypostyle hall.

- 56 Harrison 2003: 145
- 57 Homer: scroll IX:381-384
- 58 Herodotus
- 59 Diodorus and Murphy 1990: 59-60
- 60 Strabo: chapter 1, section 46
- 61 Greener 1966: 16
- 62 Foertmeyer 1989: 1-3, 10-14, 23-31
- 63 Foertmeyer 1989: 79-84
- 64 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi, Zand, Videan and Videan 1965: 107-177; El Daly 2005
- 65 Traunecker and Golvin 1984: 36-37

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cient Thebes, and an understanding of the original function and meaning of the temples at Karnak was lost during the many centuries of silence.

European rediscovery of Thebes and initial recording of Karnak temple

In 1589 CE, an anonymous Italian traveler visited Luxor and described in writing the ruins of Luxor Temple. This is the first record of Europeans rediscovering the remains. Other early tourists visited the area, and in 1718, the fallen monuments were linked by one Father Sicard to the ancient city of Thebes, mentioned by the classical Greek authors.⁶⁶ Napoleon Bonaparte sponsored a scholastic mission to Egypt in 1799. Architects, artists and other *savants* recorded the buildings and inscriptions at Karnak and other sites and compiled their work into a multi-volume publication called *Description de l’Egypte*.⁶⁷

During the years of the publication of the *Description*, local people quarried the monuments of greater Thebes for their stone for use in buildings projects. By this point, British and French scholars had deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphic script using the tri-lingual inscription on the Rosetta Stone, a stela discovered by Napoleon’s mission in 1799. These scholars quickly realized that the result of this quarrying would eventually mean the total destruction of the temple sites, just at the time the secret to the ancient language had been unlocked,⁶⁸ and they appealed to the Egyptian government to preserve these areas for future study. Jean-Francois Champollion (who made the final leap in decoding hieroglyphs) and the German scholar Karl Lepsius busily began recording the Karnak temple inscriptions and published their results in important works in the mid-1800s.⁶⁹

Work continued at Karnak throughout the second half of the 19th century, with excavators such as Mariette, Maspero, de Morgan, Grebaut and Daressy all overseeing clearance in various parts of the temple.

Karnak in the First Part of the 20th Century: Clearance and New Discoveries

In 1895, a formal commission for the study and conservation of Karnak temple was created, the “Direction des Travaux de Karnak.” The first director of the project, a trained draftsman and architect, Georges Legrain, headed the mission until 1921.⁷⁰ During his tenure, Karnak witnessed both disastrous events and wonderful discoveries. In 1899, eleven columns in the great hypostyle hall collapsed when their foundations (weakened by repeated exposure to the salinated river water or by an ill-fated but well-intentioned intervention by archaeologists) crumbled under the great weight of the columns. Legrain was forced to dismantle the huge columns, as well as others that seemed also on the verge of collapse, and reconstruct their foundations to better support their weight. He then had a



Above: the state of Karnak when Napoleon’s expedition arrived in 1799.

Below: the present state of Karnak.



66 Golvin and Goyon 1987; Greener 1966: 58-73; Traunecker and Golvin 1984: 35-50, 81-84

67 Barguet 1962; Traunecker and Golvin 1984: 102-116

68 Azim and Réveillac 2004

69 Barguet 1962

70 Centre franco-égyptien d’étude des temples de Karnak

huge ramp of mud brick built so that the columns' architraves could be set back in place once their supports were stabilized.⁷¹

Legrain oversaw clearance and conservation work in numerous areas of the temple, including the second, eighth, and ninth pylons, the area of the central bark shrine, the Middle Kingdom court, and the *Akhmenu* festival hall, to name a few. Most exciting though were his excavations of the court north of the seventh pylon.⁷² In 1903, he discovered a number of pieces of statuary buried in the floor of the court. After widening his excavations, Legrain realized he had uncovered a huge pit filled with statuary, purposely buried and covered over in ancient times. He oversaw five seasons of difficult excavation into layers below the water table before his team could go no further, uncovering some 800 statues and 17,000 bronze objects.⁷³

Maurice Pillet took up Legrain's mantle and directed the Karnak mission until 1924.⁷⁴ He continued Legrain's consolidation in the hypostyle hall, but also examined the sacred lake, the third, eighth, and tenth pylons, the courts of the southern processional routes, and parts of the Mut temple in south Karnak.⁷⁵

Henri Chevrier served as the next director until 1954.⁷⁶ In almost thirty years of work at Karnak, he completed a number of projects of his successors, including the rebuilding and stabilization of the hypostyle hall and the clearance of the sacred lake. The second, third, and tenth pylons saw continued work, and Chevrier also began new projects, such as the clearance and excavation of the remains of the temple of Akhenaten in east Karnak.⁷⁷ To try and permanently protect the temples of Karnak from the effect of the Nile flood, Chevrier also supervised an ambitious project to create a large drainage trench around the entire temple area.⁷⁸

At the same time that the "Direction des Travaux" was focused on the Amun temple, other groups and institutions began clearance and excavation projects at other areas of Karnak. Janet Gourlay and Margaret Benson started the first major excavations at the temple of Mut in the mid 1890s.⁷⁹ Beginning in 1939, the French Institute for Archaeology (IFAo) worked on the area of the Montu enclosure at north Karnak.⁸⁰ In 1949, the Egyptian Antiquities Service uncovered the first line of sphinxes marking the processional way between Karnak and Luxor. Their clearance efforts would continue in the 1950s and 60s, revealing parts of the 2km sphinx alley that functioned as a sacred way.⁸¹

Modern work at Karnak

The Centre Franco-Égyptien d'Étude des Temples de Karnak (CFEETK) was created in 1967 to supervise work at the temple of Amun at Karnak. This group, overseen by the Egyptian Supreme Council of the Antiquities (SCA), employs a

71 Azim and Réveillac 2004; Josephson 2005

72 Azim and Réveillac 2004

73 Azim and Réveillac 2004; Goyon, Cardin and Legrain 2004

74 Centre franco-égyptien d'étude des temples de Karnak

75 Azim and Réveillac 2004; Barguet 1962

76 Centre franco-égyptien d'étude des temples de Karnak

77 Azim and Réveillac 2004; Barguet 1962

78 Centre franco-égyptien d'étude des temples de Karnak

79 Benson and Gourlay 1899

80 Barguet 1962

81 Es-Saghir 1992

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large staff of both French and Egyptian archaeologists, Egyptologists, artists, architects, conservators and photographers, all concentrated on the recording and preservation of the temple and its environs. The projects undertaken by the CFEETK in the past thirty-five years are too numerous to list, and they are all detailed in their excellent publication series *Cahiers de Karnak*. Some highlights include the reconstruction of the “red chapel” of Hatshepsut and the peristyle hall of Thutmose IV in Karnak’s “Open Air” museum, the discovery of domestic areas east of the sacred lake, and ongoing studies of the architecture of the Opet temple and the painted plaster scenes of the Osiris catacombs. For more information on the CFEETK and the many individuals contributing to their projects, see: <http://www.cfeetk.cnrs.fr/>

The Karnak Hypostyle Hall Project, started by William Murnane and now directed by Peter Brand of the University of Memphis, has focused its study on the wall and column reliefs of the Hypostyle Hall. Many scenes from the hall were hand copied in the 1930s-1950s by Harold Hayes Nelson, and these drawings have been edited and published, along with a second volume of translations and commentary by Murnane and Brand: *The Great Hypostyle Hall in the Temple of Amun at Karnak*. Work continues in tracing, collating, and photographing scenes from many parts of the hall.⁸² Information on the hall and the ongoing work of the project can be found on the project website: <http://history.memphis.edu/hypostyle/>

The University of Chicago’s Epigraphic Survey team spent a number of years recording relief scenes in Karnak’s Temple of Khonsu. They published the scenes and inscriptions in three volumes, entitled: *The Temple of Khonsu*.

Excavations made by the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) in the late 1980s and early 1990s continued their earlier work defining the Karnak sphinx alleyways. Mohammed es-Saghir led a number of expeditions to trace the lines of the avenue west from the Mut Temple towards the river and north from Luxor Temple to its join with the Mut processional.⁸³ Recent excavations by the SCA have concentrated on exposing a larger portion of the sphinx alley between Luxor and Karnak.

Immediately outside of the western enclosure wall of the Amun Temple, an SCA excavation team discovered a circular Greco-Roman Period bath complex in 2007. The mud brick bath was decorated with a mosaic floor and held seating for sixteen. Work in this area, along the northern section of the precinct wall, as well as along its southern extent, where a huge revetment wall has been uncovered, is totally reshaping our understanding of Karnak in its later phases.⁸⁴

The Institute français d’archeologie Orientale (IFAO) has continued work since the late 1960s at North Karnak. Its research in the 1980s and 1990s included a



Current work going on at the Opet Temple.



Recently excavated portion of the sphinx alley between Karnak and Luxor temples.

82 Brand 2004

83 Es-Saghir 1992

84 El-Aref 2008

number of detailed studies by Jean and Helen Jacquet of the “treasury” building of Thutmose I. Much of this work has been published in the series: *Karnak-Nord*. Other excavations have concentrated on the areas within the enclosure walls of the temple of Montu. Descriptions of these projects can be found in the journal: *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (BIFAO)*.

The Akhenaten Temple Project, led by Donald Redford, has excavated in the area of east Karnak since the late 1970s. Work in this area has included the investigation of the *Kom el-Ahmar*, Akhenaten's *Gem-pa-Aten* temple, and domestic buildings dated to a variety of time periods. The project has also studied the Akhenaten temple blocks reused in later constructions at Karnak. Many of their results are included in the series: *The Akhenaten Temple Project*.

In 1976, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, joined by a team from the Detroit Institute of Art, started work at the temple of the goddess Mut in south Karnak. The excavations, directed by Richard Fazzini, have been concerned with the extent of rebuilding and remodeling of the Mut temple during the Third Intermediate Period and very beginning of the Late Period.⁸⁵ Betsy Bryan of the Johns Hopkins University began work at the Mut temple in 2001, focusing her investigations on recovering the New Kingdom phases of the temple. Both missions have active websites where yearly updates on excavation results are posted directly from the field: <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/features/mut/history.php> and <http://www.jhu.edu/egypttoday/>

The History of the Karnak Obelisks

Egyptian obelisks were standing stone monoliths, carved with four flat sides that slightly tapered upward from the base. They culminated in a pyramid-shaped tip called a “pyramidion,” sometimes gilded to reflect the sun's rays. They are today known by their Greek name *obeliskos*, given to them because of their tall, pointed shape.⁸⁶

Scholars usually trace the origin of the obelisk's form to the *benben* stone, a stone with a pointed tip linked to the primeval mound of creation in Egyptian mythology. Obelisks are believed to have been first erected at Heliopolis, the city understood as the location of the original *benben*. Heliopolis, located near the southern tip of the Delta in the north of the country, was the site of the main temple to the Egyptian sun god, Ra. Thebes, known as the “Heliopolis of the south,” was adorned with a series of magnificent obelisks as well, sometimes dedicated to the god Amun, and other times to a syncretization of Amun and Ra.⁸⁷

In general, obelisks were placed in pairs in front of monumental pylon entrances to large temples. Their sides were often inscribed by the king who ordered their construction. These inscriptions commemorate jubilee festivals, military victo-



The pyramidion of Hatshepsut's standing obelisk in the *Wadjet* hall.

85 Fazzini and Peck 1981, 1983

86 Habachi and Van Siclen 1977

87 Habachi and Van Siclen 1977

ries, and the erecting of the obelisk itself, while additionally glorifying the close relationship between the king and the solar gods.⁸⁸

Obelisks seem to have been directly involved with the cult of the temple, standing as more than mere decoration. Inscriptions on the monuments, as well as on special scarabs issued when a new obelisk was erected, show that the monoliths were the subject of direct prayer and veneration.⁸⁹ One scholar has suggested that the monuments served as a type of statue or image of the deified king, similar to the colossal statues that often stood before pylon entrances.⁹⁰

At least seventeen massive obelisks originally stood at Karnak. These include two dedicated to Thutmose I, two to Thutmose II, four to Hatshepsut, four to Thutmose III, one planned by Thutmose III and erected later by Thutmose IV, two to Amenhotep III (at north Karnak), and a pair placed by Ramesses II.⁹¹ Of the entire group, only two still stand today.

Six obelisks at one time graced the jubilee hall of Thutmose II, fronting the fourth pylon. These included a pair inscribed for Thutmose I (one of which still stands), a pair belonging to Thutmose II, probably raised by Hatshepsut (both of which were taken down when Amenhotep III constructed his 3rd pylon), and a pair erected by Thutmose III (neither of which still stands). Ramesses IV, who carved his name on many parts of Karnak, later added his own inscriptions along the side of the central text of the pair inscribed for Thutmose I. The smaller size of the later hieroglyphic signs is easily visible to the careful viewer.

Between the fourth and fifth pylons, in the *Wadjet* hall of Thutmose I, Hatshepsut placed a pair of her own obelisks. A unique series of small vignettes were added lining the central inscriptions and on the pyramidion, showing the queen with the gods and during her coronation. The inscriptions tell us that she added the obelisks to the hall as part of a jubilee celebration for her sixteenth year of reign.⁹² These monuments were partially bricked over later by the queen or by her nephew Thutmose III as part of planned renovations to the hall. However, the brick casings protected the obelisks, and one of them still towers over the hall today. The top section of the second obelisk is well preserved, and has been placed near the sacred lake at the temple.

Hatshepsut erected another pair of obelisks on the east side of the Amun precinct. They were incorporated into a new shrine, a small contra-temple, when Thutmose III built his festival hall (the *Akhmenu*) to the east of the temple core. Only pieces of these obelisks remain, but a relief from Hatshepsut's temple on the west bank of the Nile shows that these originally were adorned with a single, central line of inscription on each side. Relief scenes at that temple also depict the bringing of these grand monuments by boat to the temple from the stone quarries. They were shown transported on a single boat, placed base-to-base,



The obelisks of Thutmose I fronting Pylon IV.

- 88 Habachi and Van Siclen 1977
- 89 Habachi and Van Siclen 1977
- 90 Bell 2002
- 91 Bell 2002
- 92 Bell 2002

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and guided by a number of boats attached to the barge by ropes. The obelisks were tied to huge sleds, which, with the help of a prepared surface or rollers, would have allowed the monuments to be dragged to their place in the temple once disembarked.⁹³

Besides the pair in the *Wadjet* hall, Thutmose III placed a set of obelisks on the south side of his seventh pylon. Fragments from one of these obelisks were found at Karnak. The other, which originally stood in front of the west pylon tower, had a much more interesting history – it was removed by a Roman emperor (possibly Constantius) in the 4th century CE and transported to the coastal city of Alexandria. The emperor Julian sent a letter to the leaders of the city of Alexandria, asking them to send the obelisk to Constantinople, the capital of the Roman Empire in the east, present day Istanbul, Turkey. When the obelisk was transferred is unknown, but it eventually made it to that city, and it was erected there under the reign of the emperor Theodosius. It now adorns the Hippodrome. While only the upper portion of this obelisk survives, its inscription is very similar to an obelisk depicted in a relief scene of Thutmose III. Its full size and text can be hypothesized based on this image.⁹⁴

Although obelisks had seemingly always been placed in pairs, Thutmose III ordered a single, giant obelisk to be placed to the east of the Amun temple, past the pair of Hatshepsut in that area. This single obelisk was carved out of stone and decorated, but the death of the king must have precluded its erection at the temple. The king's grandson, Thutmose IV, eventually raised it for his grandfather, adding lines of inscription to the original text.⁹⁵ East Karnak seems to have been a special part of Thebes dedicated to the solar gods, and it was thus an appropriate place for this special, Heliopolitan monument.⁹⁶

The single obelisk, the largest ever raised at Karnak, also no longer graces Egypt. It was removed from the temple by the emperor Constantine in the 4th century CE, and shipped to Alexandria, en route to Constantinople. When the Emperor died, his son, Constantius, instead shipped the obelisk to Rome. It was placed in Rome's Circus Maximus, where it stood until the building fell into ruin; the obelisk collapsed and was covered with debris. In the 16th century CE, pope Sixtus V was informed that the remains of the obelisk were likely buried in the collapsed building. He ordered a search for the obelisk, and when it was found, its pieces were rejoined and the monument was erected in the Piazza San Giovanni in Rome. It still stands there today, its pyramidion adorned with Sixtus' heraldic symbols: mountains, a star, and a lion with pears.⁹⁷

The obelisks of Amenhotep III, destroyed, stood in north Karnak as part of the Montu temple complex. All that remains are the pedestals that originally supported the monoliths. Ramesses II's "overseer of works" described in his tomb the pair he set up for the king as located "at the upper gate of the domain of



A model rendering of the obelisks of Thutmose III fronting Pylon VII.

- 93 Dondelinger 1977; Habachi and Van Siclen 1977
- 94 Habachi and Van Siclen 1977
- 95 Habachi and Van Siclen 1977
- 96 Bell 2002
- 97 Habachi and Van Siclen 1977

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Amun” near the eastern temple of Thutmose III and Ramesses II. A set of pedestals found east of this small temple, located in a spot which would be outside the later 30th Dynasty enclosure wall, likely marks their original location.⁹⁸



A model rendering of the obelisks of Ramesses II, located in east Karnak.

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