Karnak (Egypt)

Definition: Karnak from Merriam-Webster's Geographical Dictionary

Village on the right (E) bank of the Nile in Upper Egypt; N part (Luxor is S part) of site of ancient Thebes (q.v.); site of ruins of early temple of Amen, an ancient complex of temples and shrines; later temple complex begun in Middle Kingdom times, was greatly enlarged and embellished by, among others, Amenhotep III, Seti I, Ramses II; notable features include great hypostyle hall, pylons erected by various rulers, sphinx-lined avenues, and obelisks. Smaller temples to Mont (Egyptian war-god) and Mut (wife of Amen) are nearby.

Summary Article: Karnak from The Encyclopedia of Ancient History

Karnak, north of modern Luxor in Upper Egypt, is the site of important temples from at least the Middle Kingdom through to the time that Christianity replaced the ancient gods. The ancient name of the largest complex, in the central part of the site, is Ipet-isut, "the most select of places," and it included the Great Temple of Amun (see Amun-Re), as well as smaller temples dedicated to other gods, shrines to hold the bark of the god Amun on his processions, quays and a Nilometer, obelisks, and many statues; although the exact number on display at the temple's height is not known, some twenty thousand statues, stelae, and other items of bronze and stone were recovered from a single deposit known as the "Karnak cachette," excavated at the beginning of the twentieth century. To the north of the Great Temple complex was a New Kingdom temple to Montu, the hawk-headed war god who was the family god of the 11th Dynasty. Northwest of the main Amun complex was a palace, placed in much the same location as other temple palaces of the New Kingdom, such as that at Medinet Habu and the Ramesseum. To the southeast of the Amun temple was a walled precinct with its own sacred lake that was dedicated to Mut, the consort of Amun, a temple from which hundreds of lion-headed statues of the goddess have been recovered. These seem to have originally graced the mortuary temple of Amenhotep III on the west bank (Yoyotte 1980: 50). To the east of the great temple of Amun was the largest of the sun temples of Akhenaten, the Gem-pa-aten, which was disassembled after his reign to provide construction material for the later New Kingdom structures in the temple of Amun.

Geological soundings indicate the Middle Kingdom temple was built on a levee beside the Nile, and as the river retreated to the north and west, more land was available for expansion of the temple (Graham and Bunbury 2005: 18–19). The earliest documented stone architecture from the site is a sandstone column with the name of the 11th Dynasty king Inyotef II, reused in another context (Ullmann 2007: 4). Senwosret I, perhaps adding to work begun by his father and predecessor Amenemhat I, built a limestone temple with granite thresholds (Ullmann 2007: 6).

The Middle Kingdom temple, as well as a bark shrine dedicated in the thirtieth year of Senwosret I, were largely disassembled and used as fill material in the pylons set up in the New Kingdom (the bark shrine was found in the third pylon, built in the reign of Amenhotep III). This reuse of earlier construction material reaches its zenith with the destruction of the Akhenaten temple at Thebes, when its blocks were reused in the second and ninth pylons and the hypostyle hall.

From as early as the 11th Dynasty, the Great Temple of Amun grew along two axes, one running east–west and one north–south (Ullmann 2007: 9). By the end of the 18th Dynasty, each axis consisted of a
series of pylons and courts with statues and shrines added by successive rulers. As the river retreated
to the north and west, the greater amount of land on that side of the temple allowed for growth in
those directions, and by the 30th Dynasty, the precinct of the Great Temple of Amun was surrounded
by a mud-brick wall and entered from the west through a pylon, both erected by Nektanebo I.

Once through this first pylon, the path takes the supplicant past a kiosk built by Taharqa on the north
side of the first court and a temple built by Rameses III to the south before reaching the second pylon.
Between the second and third pylons is the largest columned hall ever built in ancient Egypt, probably
begun by Rameses I, contributed to by his son Sety I, and completed by his grandson Rameses II. This
hypostyle hall consists of 134 columns in 16 rows, the center two rows providing a central axial path to
the next pylon with columns 21 m tall, while the shorter side columns were 15 m in height.

The north–south axis departs from the main temple in front of the sanctuary and extends south in the
direction of Luxor. A processional way lined with sphinxes connected the Great Temple of Amun with
the Temple of Luxor, reflecting their integration into the festival of Opet, in which the cult image
housed in the Great Temple traveled to the temple of Luxor and across the Nile to visit the temples
on the west bank.

Contributions to the temple continued until Roman times. A Coptic monastery was constructed in the
area in front of the eighth pylon (Grimal and Larché 2007: 21). The non-Pharaonic remains were
removed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the temple was largely cleared of debris and
topped columns were straightened, decaying pylons reinforced, and disassembled shrines recovered
and installed in an open air museum.

**SEE ALSO:**
Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV); Amun-Re; Khons (Khonsu); Palaces, Pharaonic Egypt; Rameses I–XI;
Temples, Pharaonic Egypt; Thebes, East.

**References and Suggested Readings**

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