

The Temple of Karnak: How Architecture Shapes Ritual Practices

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The Temple Complex at Karnak served Thebes and ancient Egypt both as an important ritual site and center of power. Originally a small temple to the god Amun, various Egyptian dynasties have added to the temple complex, from Senusret I to Ptolemy VIII. Additions such as the processional way built by Tutankhamen allowed new ceremonies to develop. By carefully organizing the plan and section of the main Temple of Amun to the spatial arrangement of surrounding temples, such as Luxor or Queen Hatshepsut's, the Egyptians allowed several rituals to develop: the Daily Ritual, the Opet Festival, Beautiful Feast of the Wadi and Wehem-Ankh. The steps needed to complete each festival or procession is guided by the orientation and relation of different sections of each temple. Thus, we will show through comparison of architectural form and its ritualistic function, how architecture can inform and guide ceremonial practices.

Introduction

The Temple Complex at Karnak has a long history whose architecture guides the various rituals that took place there. The temple complex began life under the rule of Intef II, an 11th Dynasty king (Sullivan, 2008b). It was originally just a mud brick temple to the Egyptian god Amun-Ra, a syncretization of Amun and Ra. Various expansions took place almost continuously throughout the Old and New Kingdoms, such as construction of various pylons or Hatshepsut's "red chapel", a bark shrine used during processions (Favro, 2008). As these architectural expansions took place, rituals to Amun evolved. Initially the naos, where a metal statue of the god was housed, allowed for a priest to perform simple rituals (Sullivan, 2008a). While the 'daily ritual' continued this tradition, temples for Mut and Khonsu, Amun's wife and son respectively, were added by Ramesses III and Amenophis III (Wilkinson, 2000). The layout of the Karnak temple complex, nearby Luxor, the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut (along with surrounding temples) and the hypostyle halls provided a clear path within which rituals could take place. Thus, the orientation, plan and section of the temple complex at Karnak was not random, but served specific purposes that helped guide how each ritual progressed.

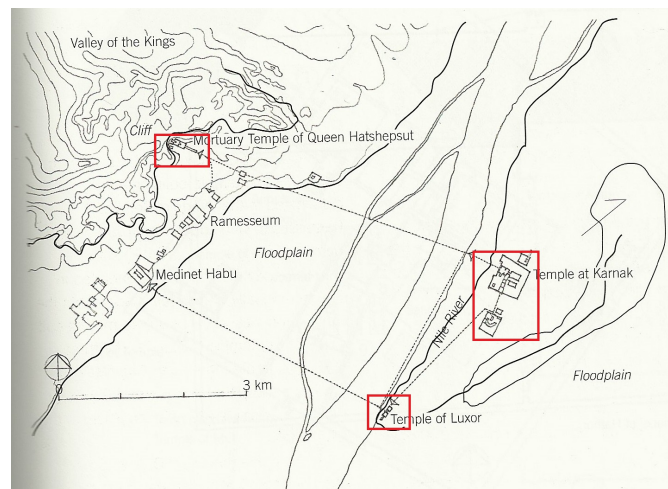


Figure 1 | Temple Complex at Karnak

Plan of the temple complex at Karnak (right-middle) and surrounding areas including Luxor (bottom) and Temple of Queen Hatshepsut (left-top). Buildings discussed in this paper are boxed red. Source: (Ching et al., 2011).

Architecture

The Karnak Temple complex, while being built over a considerable period of time and containing many layers, will be described from its current state. The main complex is located in Thebes, a city whose power fluctuated throughout the ages but nevertheless often amassed the incredible wealth needed to fund construction at the complex. To the east is the Nile river, which flows north and plays an important role in later rituals (Blyth, 2006). Approaching the complex from the Nile, one enters through the 1st pylon, constructed during Nectanebo I's reign. The Shoshenq I court follows, a wide open area where people could gather during the rituals. On the south-side of this court is a bark shrine and temple of Ramesses III. Through the 2nd pylon, one enters the magnificent hypostyle hall of Ramesses II and passes through to the Festival Court of Thutmose II, which contains a peristyle hall, shrine and obelisks. This gives way to the Red Chapel of Hatshepsut's reign and the 4th and 5th pylons of Thutmose I and finally the white chapel of Senusret I (Favro, 2008). This chapel is sealed by a door and inside holds the metal statue of Amun-Ra; though, this statue also resided in the red chapel later on. South of this chapel, outside the main temple is a sacred lake (Fig. 2).

Heading south before the 4th pylon, one walks through a court and the 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th pylons. The entire complex is enclosed by a *temenos* wall, known here as the enclosure wall. This serves to both protect the complex and provide a barrier between the sacred and outside world. Heading south, one passes the temple of Khonsu, Amun's son, and proceeds to the processional way, surrounded by a wall lined with sphinxes (Sullivan, 2008c). Eventually the temple of Mut, Amun's wife, is reached and she is brought out to join the procession. At this point, the priests journey two miles south to the temple of Luxor. The old temple had a single bark shrine, but the new one has a triple bark shrine and contains the resting place of Amun-em-ope, which is sealed by a door. Walking west, the Nile is quickly reached and upon floating north, one reaches a canal leading to a quay (wharfs) where one disembarks and once again faces from west entrance of the complex. Lying directly along the axis east-west axis of Karnak is Hatshepsut's Djoser-djeseru (holy

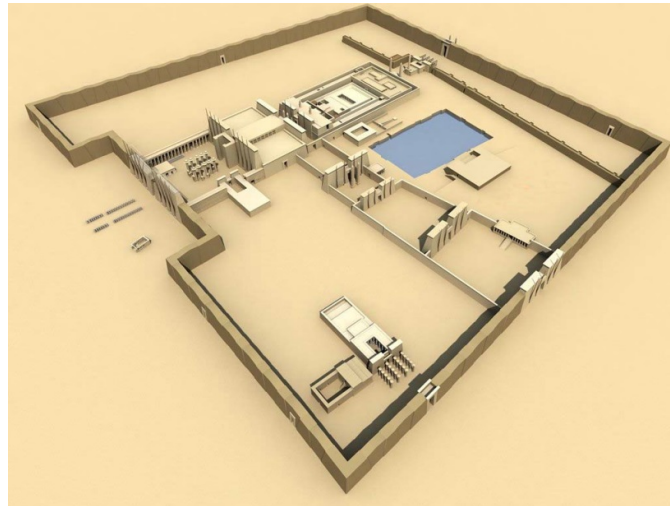


Figure 2 | Temple of Amun-Ra

3D reconstruction of the Temple of Amun-Ra during Roman times. The first through sixth pylons can be seen going west to east while the seventh through tenth pylons can be seen extending south (bottom-right). A sacred lake and temple of Khonsu are also present. Source: (?).

of holies) temple, where other festivals take place. Walking through the Karnak complex in this manner is not only logical, the spatial arrangement has clear desire lines, but also leads you through the steps in the rituals performed here.

Daily Ritual

An important ritual carried out is the Daily Ritual in which the priest makes an offering of bread, meat and wine. The architectural plan is significant to the symbolism embedded in the ritual. The metal statue itself is hidden from view when the ritual is not taking place. The priest enters an outer sanctuary, which functions as a sacred place but still separates Amun-Ra from the outside world. Opening the door, the 'seal' on the Amun's home is broken and the priest can enter, in effect opening up the *ka*, or life force, of the god (Fig. 3). Placing the naos in a darkly lit, enclosed space, as opposed to the more open spaces of the Greek naos (see the Temple of Athena) forces the priest to light a candle. Because one of the priest's duties was to cleanse the home of the god, the candle brought light to the Amun's home and incenses (myrrh), which served to clean the naos. Then, food and other items were brought from the outer sanctuary to inner shrine. After finishing the ritual, the priest removes the offerings outside the naos and seals the sanctuary. Thus, as

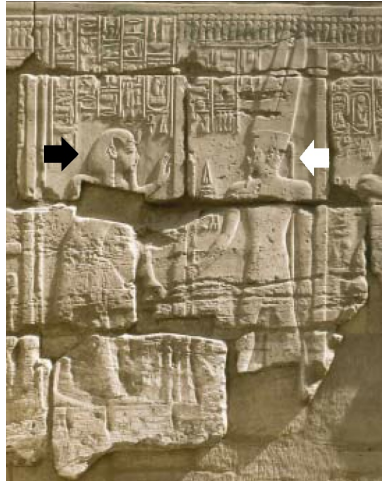


Figure 3 | Sety I breaking Amun's seal

Part of the daily ritual involved breaking Amun's seal (opening the door to his shrine), depicted here with Sety I (black arrow) and Amun (white arrow). Source: (Sullivan, 2008a).

opposed to some of the more open temples of gods in other societies, placing Amun-Ra's shrine deep in the complex and seal serves to separate the god from the rest of the world while providing a symbolic way for the priest to renew Amun's *ka* (Sullivan, 2008a).

The Opet Festival

Once a year, Amun, Mut and Khonsu came out of their temples and travel south to Luxor. This is known as the Opet festival because the king brings the barks to Amun-*opet's* temple at Luxor. This ritual served to renew the king's power and affirm his right of divine rule. In addition, it would reinvigorate Amun until the next festival. The first evidence of this ritual is found during Hatshepsut's reign (Sullivan, 2008c). Amun's bark is carried out of the inner sanctuary and south past the seventh pylon. Along the way, Khonsu joins the procession and the placement of his temple within the enclosure points to his status as a child, son of Amun and Mut, and thus needs protection. The bark then proceeds outside the enclosure wall (Fig. 4). Leaving the *temonos* moved Amun from one spiritual world or sacred place to another. If the other temple was within the main Karnak complex, it is unlikely that the festival would be as significant, because Amun would have never left his domain. The sphinx lined processional way to Mut's temple both separates the procession from the public or outside world while also providing a clear

path with stopping points. The bark shrines allowed the divine being to rest in a sacred place and the priest to rest—again, this dual function of the architecture is evident. The placement of Mut’s temple outside the main complex can serve two ritual purposes—to show Amun’s supremacy while also allowing for him to gather his significant others on his journey to replenish his *ka*.



Figure 4 | Priest carrying Amun-Ra’s Bark

Priest would carry Amun-Ra’s bark during the processions, bringing it to various bark shrines both to rest the god and themselves. Arrow indicates bark. Source: (Sullivan, 2008b)

The barks, carrying the royal couple, Amun, Mut and Khonsu, would have then turned towards the Nile and traveled upstream to the temple of Luxor. At the triple bark temple, we observe another example of architecture guiding the ritual itself. Three entrances correspond to Amun (center), Mut and Khonsu. Because the festival is centered on renewing Amun’s *ka*, and not as focused on Mut or Khonsu, the three entrances to Luxor temple’s triple bark temple serve to divide the procession physically and symbolically. Mut and Khonsu, who like good family members accompanied Amun through his journey, are no longer needed and the building is designed to reflect this. The two side bark entrances lead to temples where Mut and Khonsu stay until the festival has finished while the king and Amun continue through to Amun-em-Opet’s shrine.

The Luxor Temple is situated close to the Nile, which helps facilitate the final stage of the ceremony. After the king has renewed his rule and Amun’s *ka* has been replenished, they travel on a barge downstream back to the Karnak temple complex. Once again, the spatial arrangement guides the ceremony; after a long journey from his shrine, Amun has

an easy ride down the Nile (flows south to north). While the specifics of the canal in front of the first pylon are not fully known, it is likely that the barge went into a quay (wharf) where Amun and the procession disembarked before proceeding back to his shrine. The Opet Festival is thus an manifestation of the architecture as much as the culture. Whether the architecture and physical constraints guided the development of rituals or visa versa is not clear, but it is evident that they are intimately intertwined.

It should be noted that the ritual itself changed over time with regards to the number of barks involved in the ceremony. During Hatshepsut's time, the bark exited from the red chapel and each god joined onto that same bark. Several bits of evidence point to this: the Mut temple only have a single location in the central chamber to put a bark and there was only a single bark shrine at the time north of the Luxor temple. Further, rather than moving up the river, the procession followed the processional way to Luxor. The different routes taken was influenced by the architecture—in the era of Ramesses II there would have been a new hypostyle hall where all the barks met and the route would have thus been slightly shifted. Lastly, it is evident that during Hatshepsut's time, the festival would have been less open to the public while the later route via the Nile offered a more public showing to occur. Thus, the ritual was altered over time as new additions were made to the complex itself.

Beautiful Feast of the Wadi

Amun participated in several other festivals throughout the year, another took advantage of the location and orientation of Karnak and *Djeser-djeseru* (holy of holies). Looking across the river from the 1st pylon's axis, one stares directly at the Mortuary Temple (Ching et al., 2011). It has also been suggested that the procession left through the southern route, going through Hatshepsut's eight pylon as it aligned with the central axis of the western temples (Sullivan, 2008c). This might be plausible, as it would allow Amun to greet his wife at her temple before departing across the river from her quay.

Having Karnak be across the river from the final destination (Temple of Queen Hatshepsut) lends a greater weight to the ceremony. The actual procession involved Amun

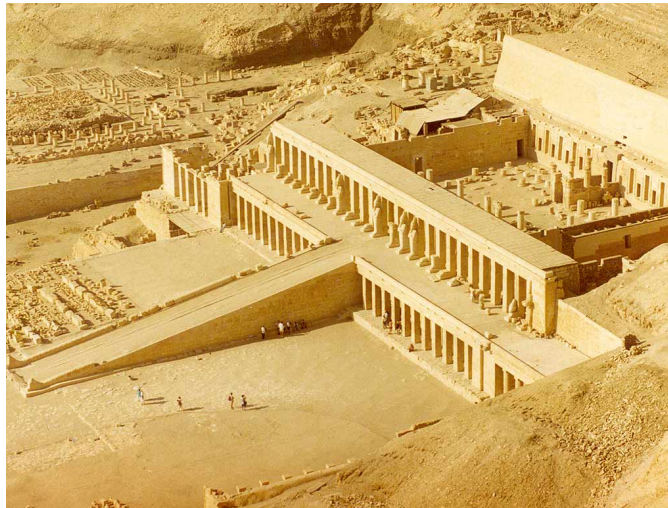


Figure 5 | Temple of Queen Hatshepsut

The Temple of Queen Hatshepsut was part of the Beautiful Feast of the Wadi. Source: (Ching et al., 2011).

crossing the river and up the steps of the terrace where he would enter the inner chambers of the temple and finally be placed in the shrine built for him. He would rest there overnight and the next day food and gifts brought to him before his movement back across the river. Because Amun is going to the land of Hathor, a goddess who greets the dead and welcomes them to eternal life, it is appropriate that he should cross a physical and spiritual boundary.

While not a human construct, this was undoubtedly a purposeful segregation of a temple complex into multiple parts as they relate to rituals and the environment. Amun-Ra represented the sun, which rose to the east, where Karnak is relative to the Nile. The setting sun, representing death, was to the West, where we find the Mortuary Temple. The journey to the Chapel of Amun, located in the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut, involved ascending three terraces and passing through an inner court (Fig. 5). Because the procession was a joyous one accompanied by singers, dancers and others, the terraces could serve as a convenient gathering place for the throngs of people involved. Thus, unlike the walled-off procession of the Opet Festival, which discouraged public participation, this festival was more festive and the architecture conformed to this. The Chapel itself

was cut into the rock, possible as a way to symbolize Amun's descent to the land of the dead. Yet by raising the chapel above the ground, Amun still held his place as a god.

Like the Opet Festival, the construction of new temples altered the processional route. After Hatshepsut's death, Thutmose III constructed a new temple, *Djeser-akhet* (holy of the horizon), situated south-east of *Djeser-djeseru*. By moving one of the temples to be visited closer to the tombs of previous kings lining this side of the river, it provided a reason for the procession to visit each king. Soon, each king wished to have Amun's bark stay in his temple, this was a way to show their power—the god rested in their temple rather than those of other rulers. Around the 20th dynasty, an earthquake caused the collapse of several of the temples, ending this particular festival and illustrating the reliance of rituals on a specific type of architecture to flourish (Sullivan, 2008c).

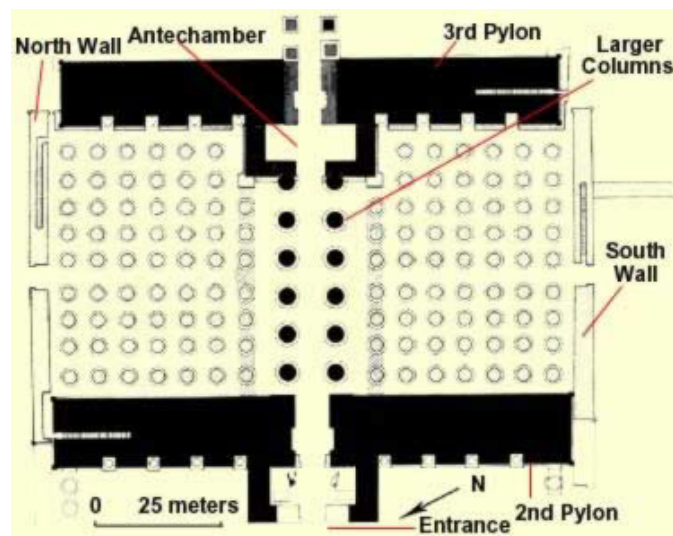


Figure 6 | Great Hypostyle Hall

The Hypostyle hall at the Temple of Amun. Source: (Ching et al., 2011).

Hypostyle Hall

The hypostyle hall of the main Karnak complex contains a record of kings and benefactors on the complex (Fig. 6). On the exterior (or west face) of the north tower of Amenhotep III's third pylon are depictions of various festivals that took place there (Sullivan, 2008a). Thus, they served as a "superdimensional history book" that help record who had helped create the temple while informing the priest of past ritual practices (Ching

et al., 2011). The darkly lit halls also served to give the procession a solemn tone when it passed through here, as this was where the king and Amun first met. Contrast this with the open terraces at the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut and we again see how the section and plan helps serve different ritualistic purposes.

Conclusion

The design of the Temple Complex at Karnak informs and guides the rituals that took place there. Initially just a single mud temple, it grew with additions of pylons, halls and enclosures. These additions induced changes in the rituals that took place. The sacred path to Mut's and then Amun-em-Opet's temple serve to physically separate Amun from the other gods. This makes the festival take longer—it is more arduous to carry the bark from shrine to shrine. But informative design decisions like this and placement of Luxor to the south serve to add symbolic significant to the journey. Amun isn't supposed to renew his *ka* whenever he felt like it. But, by allowing easy passage back via the Nile was a method of rewarding the god, and king, for his hard work. Small additions helped guide this and other rituals, such as bark shrines that both served as a sacred resting place for Amun and the priest. A different spatial layout would have altered the type and significance of the rituals, this is evidenced by the cessation of the Beautiful Feast of the Wadi when those buildings were destroyed. Thus, the architecture of Karnak has helped shape and inform the processions and festivals that take place there.

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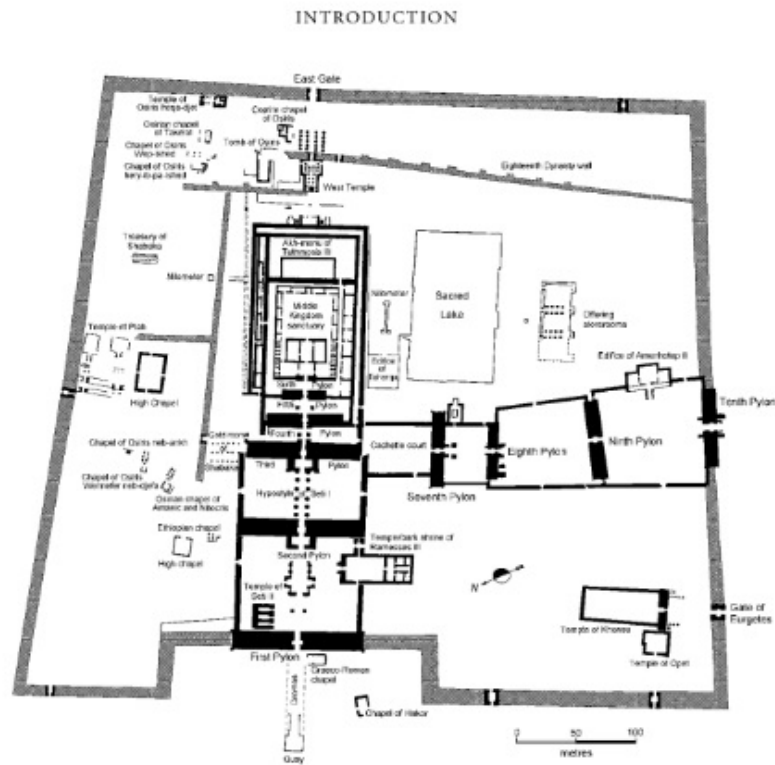


Figure 1 General plan of the temple of Amun at the end of Dynasty XXX (after Aldred, C. et al., *Les Pharaons: L'Empire des Conquérants*: 301).

great building projects, and they also attempted to outdo the magnificence of earlier kings by enlarging, enriching, adorning, replacing, and sometimes simply usurping the monuments which their predecessors had erected. The temple in ancient Egypt was a place of power. Here, celestial and terrestrial combined to form heaven upon earth. Behind the high walls, daily rituals took place to maintain the well-being of Egypt and the equilibrium and harmony of the universe: and the Holy of Holies, the central sanctuary, was the core from which all this power was generated. To honour the gods with rich and costly buildings was to add to this power and to increase the benefits which would flow from the gods to Egypt and its king. This explains the great conglomeration of monuments which accrued over the millennia under countless kings, seemingly without an overall scheme, which makes up Karnak (Fig. 1).

The visitor, on first approaching the temple, ascends a ramp on to a raised quay adorned with two small obelisks of Seti II (Dynasty XIX). The sphinxes lining the avenue ahead are inscribed to Ramesses II (Dynasty XIX) and re-inscribed to Pinedjem

Figure 7 | Karnak: Evolution of A Temple.
Representative image from the text. Source: (Blyth, 2006)



1500 BCE

West and the deified dead kings. The festival came to be associated with renewal and regeneration. It occurred during the second month of Shemu, the harvest season (roughly our April), and lasted for over twenty days.

3. Amun's cult image traveled every ten days from the Temple of Luxor on the east bank to the shrine of Medinet Habu (ca. 1460-1420 BCE) on the west bank. The original name was Djahnet, and according to popular belief, it was the place where Amun first appeared. The cult images were transported to the various temples by means of a symbolic barque, which was carried on poles on the shoulders of devotees.

Queen Hatshepsut's mortuary temple played a key role in the processional events as the temporary resting place for the barque during the Beautiful Feast of the Valley. Hatshepsut, daughter of Thutmosis I, the fifth pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty, was a charismatic and controversial figure in her role as a female monarch. She ruled for twenty years, during a particularly strong moment in the Egyptian economy. After her death, it is presumed that Thutmosis III, her stepson, ordered the systematic erasure of her name from any monument she had built, including her temple at Deir el-Bahri. Some of her monuments were destroyed outright. Such destructions were not uncommon in Egyptian history.

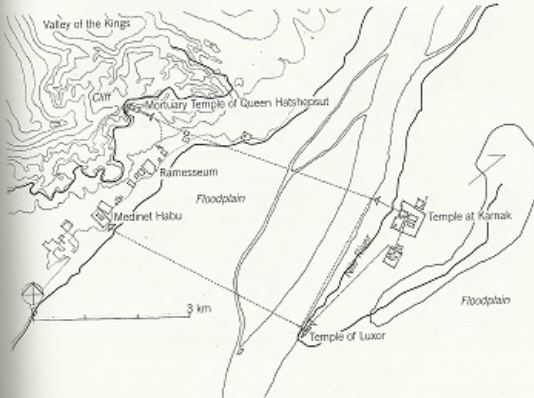
The temple, built by Senmut, her architect, went against the tradition of enclosed precincts. It combined mortuary temple, processional way, rock-cut tomb, and ancillary chapels into one synthetic unity with no parallel in Egyptian architecture. The original Egyptian name of the temple was *djeser-djeseru*, or "the sublime of the sublimes," because it is located in an area that was called Djeseret, or "sublime place," which was dedicated to Hathor, a mother goddess as well as the goddess of love and beauty. A preexistent Hathor chapel on the site was positioned directly under an impressive cliff and built partially into Hatshepsut's temple. The temple was approached by a causeway and a canal that allowed the sacred barque to be brought from the Nile. The temple did not contain her tomb, which was located in the Valley of the Kings and is concealed behind the cliff that looms over her mortuary temple.

3.21 Hieroglyphic relief of the Barque festival

of Amun, Khonsu, and Mut were escorted from Karnak to the Temple of Luxor. At a particular moment during the events, the deity "spoke" to confirm the legitimacy of the king. The god's legitimization of the king was reciprocated by gifts to the temple from the royal family. The festival took place during Akhet (roughly our September), the season when the Nile flooded, and lasted for eleven

days, but as time progressed, the number of festival days grew. The journey from Karnak to Luxor was made over land along a processional street; the return journey was made along the Nile by means of boat.

2. The Beautiful Feast of the Valley coincided with a celebration of the dead in which Amun, Mut, and Khonsu would travel to the western shore to visit the gods of the



3.22 The principal temples and processional routes, Karnak

Figure 8 | A Global History of Architecture. Source: (Ching et al., 2011) Representative image from the text.



Figure 9 | Digital Karnak: Timestamp. Source: (Favro, 2008)
Representative image from the text.

DIGITAL KARNAK



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.

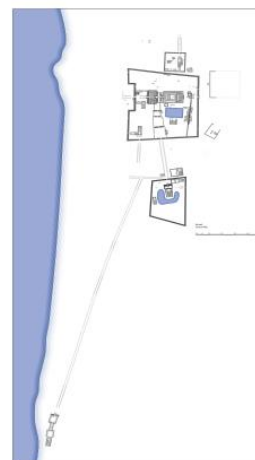
The houses and workshops of the ancient Thebans were located on the river's east bank. Little remains of the ancient city, as it is covered by the modern city of Luxor. A series of important temples, composing the religious heart of Thebes, are most of what remains today. To the south, close to the banks 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).

Figure 10 | Introduction to the Temple of Karnak
Representative image from the text. Source: (Sullivan, 2008b)

DIGITAL KARNAK



The Daily Ritual

Introduction to the Daily Ritual:

The **Daily Ritual** was one of a series of cultic rituals performed for the statue of the god by temple priests each day. Performed in the **morning after the first light of dawn**, it was complemented by similar but more abbreviated rituals in the afternoon and evening. The Egyptians believed that the gods themselves had established the correct form of the rituals, and along with the celebration of annual festivals, these acts were considered imperative for securing the continuing beneficence of the divinities.¹

Motivating the ritual was the desire to satisfy and placate the god through the protection, nourishment, and service of his or her cult statue. The image of the god, enclosed within its naos within the sanctuary, was believed to contain that god's **ka**, or "life force." By providing the god's **ka** with the benefit of numerous offerings, the Egyptians hoped to receive patronage and approval from the god in return.²

In theory, the pharaoh, who held the role of "high priest" of all the gods' cults in Egypt, performed the Daily Ritual to Amun each day at Karnak. In the relief scenes preserved in Karnak's hypostyle hall, King Sety I of the 19th Dynasty is represented as executing the designated cult acts. In reality, the king would not have been present in Thebes for much of the year, as the administrative center of Egypt in the New Kingdom was located in the north at Memphis. **Instead, a high-ranking priest of the temple would have carried out the ritual.** At Karnak, this would have been the temple's **high priest of Amun**,³ although there is some evidence that priests may have taken turns officiating these important rites.⁴

The performance of the Daily Ritual began in the early morning, with the entrance of the purified priest into **the sanctuary**. He lit a torch and burned incense, **illuminating and cleansing the darkened, most sacred space of the temple**. Next, he approached the shrine holding the cult statue of the god Amun. The seal securing the doors was broken, the bolts pulled back, and the door to the shrine opened, revealing the image of the god. The priest then knelt before the god, kissing the ground before Amun. After raising himself, he chanted greetings and praises to the god, while censuring and offering precious spices and oils to the statue. He removed the figure from the shrine, cleaning and purifying the image before ornamenting it in fresh linen, oils and cosmetics. After being purified a second time, the god's statue was returned to the shrine. The priest then invited the god to inhabit his statue, and offered him food and drink for sustenance. Af-



Episode B: Sety I breaks the seal of the Amun-Ra shrine.

- 1 Shafer 1997
- 2 Lorton 1999
- 3 Golvin and Goyon 1987: 41-42
- 4 Lorton 1999

Figure 11 | Daily Ritual
Representative image from the text. Source: (Sullivan, 2008a)

DIGITAL KARNAK



Processional Routes and Festivals

Introduction

Like today, in ancient times the Egyptians enjoyed commemorating days of religious and political significance (both local and national) with special festivities. For the Egyptians, this meant a few days or weeks off from their usual daily labor, as well as feasting and celebrating with their family and community. Records of the endowments given to temples for the celebration of the largest, state-sponsored festivals show that huge amount of food and drink (usually bread, beer and meat) were allotted for the celebrations. Preparations for one three-week festival included the production of over eleven thousand loaves of bread and cakes.¹ The distribution of such quantities of food suggests that the entire community took part in at least some celebrations.

Ancient Egyptian festivals were often linked to astronomical phenomena, agricultural seasons and political events. Minor celebrations took place monthly, while larger events occurred annually or sometimes only once in a pharaoh's lifetime.² For example, the king traditionally celebrated a *sed-festival*, a ritual ceremony aimed at his rejuvenation, only after thirty years of rule. Some festivals were observed throughout the country, and others were linked to local or regional deities or events.³ Some of the most interesting festivals are those that linked two temples together with the cult image of one temple traveling to another temple in a ritual procession.

Festival processions were a unique type of celebration, as the image of the god came forth from the temple before the populace. Since regular Egyptians did not commonly have access to the interior of the temples, this was a rare chance to interact with the divine. Written records show that during these processions of the divine cult image, private people sought and received oracles and revelations from the god.⁴

Depictions of bark processions suggest that a variety of types of people directly participated in the parade. Troops of soldiers, priests, dancers, musicians, and singers are all shown on tomb or temple reliefs as part of the cortege. The addition of music - rhythmic clapping, the rattling of *sistra* (a percussion instrument that sounds when shaken), and chanting or singing - must have heightened the experience for both the viewer and the participants.



A scene from Luxor Temple showing the procession during the *Opet* festival.

- 1 Kitchen 1982: 169
- 2 Shafer 1997: 25
- 3 Shafer 1997: 25
- 4 Spalinger 2001: 523

Figure 12 | Processional Routes and Festivals

Representative image from the text. Source: (Sullivan, 2008c)



Figure 13 | The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt
 Representative image from the text. Source: (Wilkinson, 2000)