

**The Karnak temple complex is the biggest in ancient Egypt and with 60% of the ruins either partly rebuilt or still visible it gives a good impression of the extension of this key Egyptian holy site.**

In antiquity Karnak was called by Egyptians *ipet-sut* meaning the preferred of all sites. It is important to understand that 12 of the 32 pharaohs of the New Kingdom period built pylons, halls, temples and obelisks in Karnak and even 1,000 years later 2 pharaohs of the 30th dynasty during Greek Ptolemy times added buildings.

The Karnak complex consists of 3 separately walled areas, which are all next to each other. Today only the main temple complex dedicated to sun god Amun is open to the public. The medium sized temple area to the south is dedicated to Amun's wife, mother goddess Mut, and is linked with a sphinx alley built by pharaohs

Ramses II statue 10m high situated in the first temple court yard showing him in full regalia with sechem scepter as symbol of power and nechacha wisk the symbol of royalty and his first wife Queen Nefertari between his feet.



# The Karnak Temple Complex & Egyptian New Kingdom

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10<sup>th</sup> pylon gate in the Amun temple perimeter wall connecting it via a sphinx lined alley with the Mut temple area a few hundred meters to the south.



8<sup>th</sup> pylon gate built by female Pharaoh Hatshepsut with the only statue of her which was not destroyed by her successor Tuthmosis III.

### Amenhotep III and Ramses III.

To the north and adjacent to the Amun temple complex lies the small temple area dedicated to goddess Maat responsible for overall order and cosmic balance and her brother war god Month, both children of sun god Re. Main deity Amun was already the state god and official cult from the 11th dynasty around 2000BC. The New Kingdom period lasted for 480 years from 1550-1070BC and included the 18-20th dynasties.

### Monumental Karnak Pylon

The Karnak complex was linked in antiquity through a canal with the Nile and a harbor basin allowed the royal and holy barges to stop right in front of the first pylon.

This area is today a paved open place and from here one could see right across the Nile the famous Hatshepsut mortuary temple shining in the bright sun light at the foot of the steep cliff at *Der al Bahari* in West Thebes.

A short sphinx alley with ram heads representing Amun lead to the first massive Karnak pylon and to its left and right were

previously positioned 2 colossal obelisks built by Seti II and the chapel for god Hakoris.

The first Karnak pylon is the biggest in Egyptian history being 113m wide and reaching a height of 43m, which is equivalent to over 12 floors. It is not just a monumental towered gate, but with various staircases and rooms for guards inside, plus a terraces on top, really a building in itself.

### Amun, Mut & Chons Temples

The following first court yard measures 84-103m and has only one column left standing, which reaches a height of 21m. This court area houses 2 triple temples both dedicated to the main trinity of gods, Amun, his wife Mut and their son Chons.

The first small temple was built by Seti II with three cellas, so that each god could be worshipped separately and the second mid-sized temple was built by Ramses III with Osiris

columns, simple square columns fronted by full heights Osiris statues.

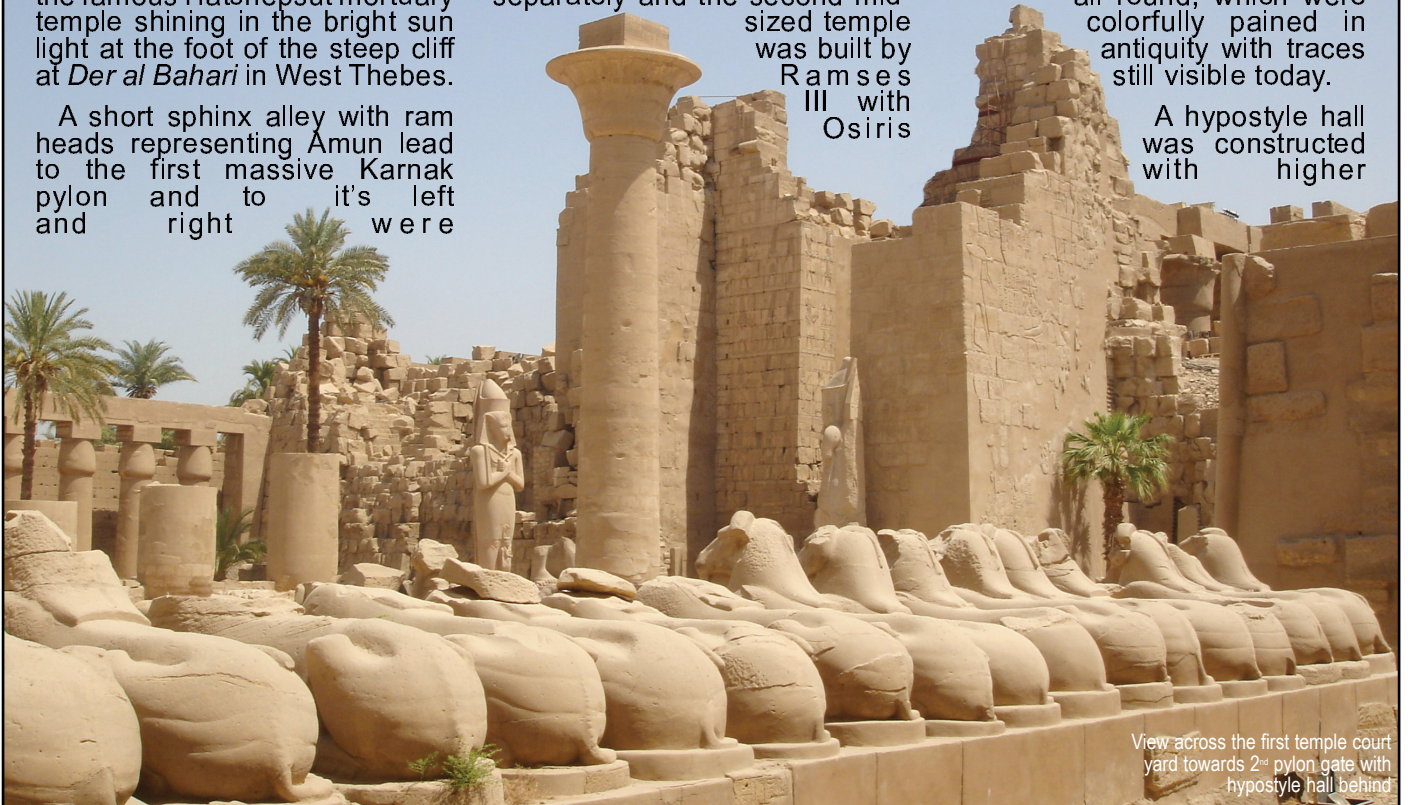
### Impressive Hypostyle Hall

The second pylon is richly decorated with many detailed scenes of the typical beating of enemies symbolizing superiority and balance of cosmic order in the Egyptian world. Thereafter follows a most impressive columned hall I have ever seen in Egypt and it is really a moment of deep refection, which came upon me when stepping into it.

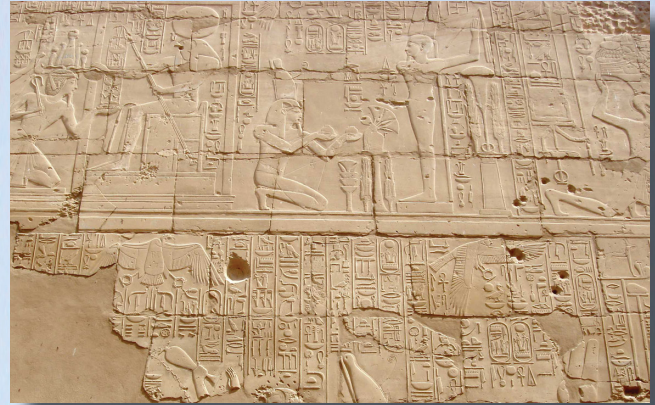
Just imagine the size of this hypostyle hall with 134 colossal papyrus bundle columns with open capitels in 16 rows on an area measuring 54x104m or 5,408 m<sup>2</sup>.

All columns and walls plus ceiling beams have deep carved relief scenes and hieroglyphs all round, which were colorfully painted in antiquity with traces still visible today.

A hypostyle hall was constructed with higher



View across the first temple court yard towards 2<sup>nd</sup> pylon gate with hypostyle hall behind



middle passage columns to create a higher ceiling and additional side walls at the top, which had columned windows to let in light and create the necessary air circulation.

### Hatshepsut Reign

The rest of the Karnak complex is very much in ruins and has not yet been rebuilt. But there are various interesting smaller buildings at which to look. Nevertheless it is highly interesting to wonder around and explore the full extend of this temple area, as it's walls and many relief scenes offer an interesting insight into the Egyptian culture and life at the times.

Most interesting is the famous Hatshepsut obelisk, the highest in Egypt with 30m and weighing 323 tons. Hatshepsut was the 4th female ruler following after Meritneith in the 1st dynasty, Nitokris in the 6th dynasty and Nefrusobek in the 12th dynasty. But she was the first to declare herself king (the title pharaoh was not yet used) shortly after faking

power from the only male heir of her deceased husband Tuthmosis II her nine year old nephew.

Hatshepsut had herself actually depicted as male in all relief scenes and ruled alone for 21 years. During that time she did not embark on any military campaigns and peace came back to Egypt and the country prospered with various trade expeditions to other countries in the region.

One such expedition was documented in relief scenes, showing ships sailing to the mysterious Kingdom of Punt in Somalia to bring back gold, frankincense trees and other goods and animals. These relief scenes can be seen at the Hatshepsut mortuary temple in *Der al Bahari*.

### Revenge of Tuthmosis III

Once in power at the age of 30, Tuthmosis III started to erase his aunt's name and pictures from many relief scenes on temple walls.

But it would have been a god disgracing act to



View from holy lake at the destroyed side walls of the south halls between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> pylon gate, which are going to be rebuilt some time in future.

pull down the Hatshepsut obelisk, so he built a high brick wall around it, so that only the top was peeping out and this explains the lighter more sun stained color of the top part. Tuthmosis also had his own obelisk built, but it only reached 20m and weighted 40% of that of Hatshepsut's obelisk.

Obelisks were built to connect with gods and some carried a gold top cover to reflect sun light

as a sign of gods presence on earth. Tuthmosis was also the first king to use an additional title that of pharaoh, which could be translated as the master of the Great House, which was the name for the palace of the king.

### Power of Karnak Priesthood

The enormous Karnak complex needed an army of priests to run and lots of money to maintain it.

So later during the New Kingdom period the Amun high priest and his extensive priesthood became a powerful force in Egypt challenging the pharaohs.

And after the New Kingdom period the priesthood even ruled Upper Egypt for some time. This was possible as temples were important administration centers, given royal land grants and farms to support themselves.

Therefore the Karnak complex became an economy in itself with 81,000 slaves and many animal herds counting over 240,000 heads and for transportation of goods 83 ships were also part of the Karnak priestly empire.

In addition the Karnak priesthood was entitled to tribute from 65 cities along the Nile in Upper Egypt bolstering the temple coffers further. These properties needed protection and therefore the priesthood maintained a growing army which was later used against the pharaohs.

### Important Festivals

At first religious festivals were reserved for the members of the royal court and priesthood inside the walled temple precincts.

Later in the New Kingdom the public had similar festivities outside, when holy rituals were performed inside the temple and over time part of the holy rituals being carried out in public, such as the most important annual *Opet* festivities held at Karnak at the end of the all important Nile inundations.

This was also the point of the start of the new economic year, which normally fell in September, when day and night were equally long. It was first documented by Hatshepsut in wall relief scenes in the Red Chapel at Karnak dated in Egyptian calendar terms on 16 Achet II, or in Gregorian calendar terms 22 Sept. 1463BC.

Once a year the statue of sun god Amun, king of gods and main state cult, was taken on a short barge procession on the Nile to visit the temple complex of Luxor.

These festivities could last up to 27 days and the whole population stopped working and participated to worship Amun and perform

rituals for future fertility of the land and the all important maintenance of the overall cosmic balance of all things. This might have inspired Prophet Mohammad when introducing Ramadan.

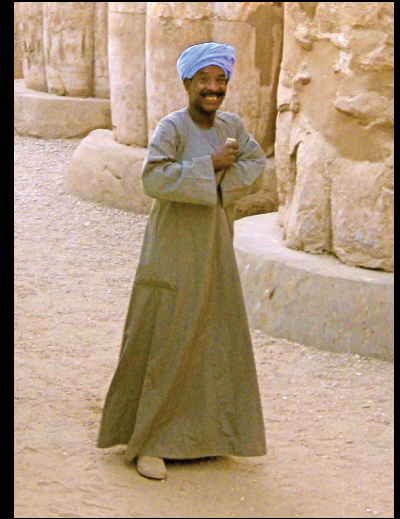
During that time many sportive and board games were played with the pharaoh participating. These games had all religious significance, such as the *senet* board game played by two. By moving stones on a board, which represented the way through the underworld, they practiced their important belief in resurrection of every being after death.

But these were not the only festivities during which statues of Amun were moved to visit other important religious sites. The so-called valley festivities were held in Thebes when the solid gold statue of main deity Amun was transported on a barge again across the Nile to visit various mortuary temples of the pharaohs in West Thebes. This visit was combined with various ceremonial dinners at temples and in or outside selected royal tombs in the Valley of Kings and Queens.

Similar annual dinners in honor of deceased took place 1000 years later in Petra and Madain Saleh. This practice and worshipping goddess Isis certainly were copied from old



View at the north gate of the first tenemos courtyard, which shows the circumventing papyrus shaped columned gallery with missing roof.



Egyptian rituals throughout the Middle East.

### Contemporary Opet Report

The following is what I put working in the Valley of Kings as artisan painter living in the workers village of Deir al Medinah would have told his grandchildren, of what he experienced during the exceptionally long 66 years rule of the most important pharaoh of the New Kingdom period Ramses II.

*"We had already washed our clothes and took a bath in the holy Nile the previous day, as we had to get up before sun rise to participate in the important opet prayer. I also wanted to secure a place with a perfect view on the banks of the Nile. The reason was that on the most important day of the opet festivities your mother and I wanted to see the passing barge with the solid gold statue of the most important sun god Amun.*

*Soon after we left our house we found ourselves in a procession of masses coming from everywhere in West Thebes streaming down to the Nile. People were very cheerful*

*and chatting, which created an unusual noise level. With the rise of the sun everybody went quiet and got down to pray and worship the sun and raising at least one amulet they carried with them towards it, to get the important daily sun blessing.*

*Then we waited for hours until the first sounds of the holy Apis bull horns came across the river from the Karnak harbor. I put had already realized, that the changing river was flowing faster on the other side and this meant, that the barge procession would pass very close to them, as it would row upstream to Luxor, which was called weset or ipet-resit in the old Egyptian language.*

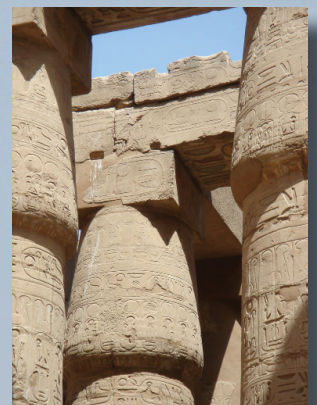
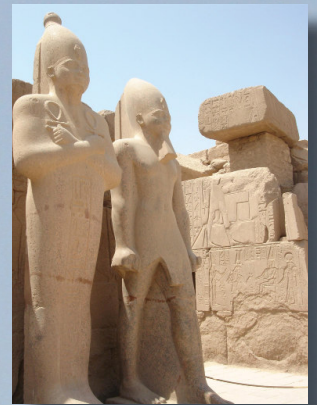
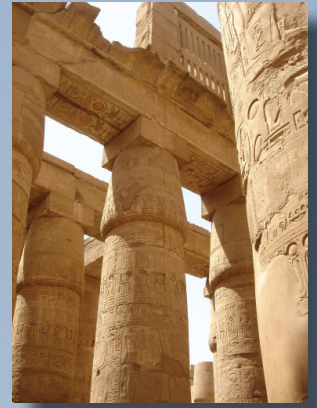
*The detailed opet rituals and procedures were prescribed. The statue was accompanied by pharaoh Ramses II or Ka-Nekhet-Meri-Maat (his Horus name), his main queen Nefertari, his first daughter Merit-Amun, who was bestowed with the title of "god's wife of Amun".*

*24 high ranking priests all dressed in simple white robes carried the holy barge from the*

*temple to the harbor. In front of the procession lower ranked priests were moving backwards with their sight on the barge cleaning the way by sprinkling holy water and milk on the ground. The golden ram statue of Amun's holy animal followed the barge. Thereafter came the pharaoh in his war chariot drawn by two energetic horses, which he had difficulty to contain at this low pace.*

*Worshippers who had turned out in masses from all over the country and were kept at bay by temple servants with long sticks. They had covered the side of the procession path with a million of small ceramic plates inscribed with their personal wishes and requests for blessing they asked Amun to fulfill. When the barge passed they all kneeled down to pray, praise and thank Amun for his blessings. The path and river banks were also lined with thousands of sacrificing tables and plates laden with wine, beer, fruit, vegetables, chicken and veal meat to feed the gods. As a small boy this father had taught him not to look at the holy Amun statue, nor the pharaoh, as common people were not*





21m high Taharqa column erected by the pharaoh with the same name.

privileged to enter the temple precincts and look at any divine objects. This was reserved for the priests, royal family and court.

But over time the general population was asked to show their respect once a year to state cult god Amun and cheer the only living representative of all gods on earth, the god like pharaoh. Slowly the first barge emerged from the canal onto the

river followed by over a dozen others, including the barge with the statue of Amun's wife, main mother goddess Mut and their son moon god Chons.

All barges were made from imported Phoenician cedar wood and colorfully painted and beautifully decorated with holy lotus flowers. The deep beating of drums giving tact for the rowers was mixed with varying sounds of typical Egyptian instruments

such as harp, lute, lyre, oboe, double clarinet and flute. They were only interrupted by the holy sistrum, a metal rattle, which was reserved for gods, especially for main mother goddess Isis, to be used for special rituals only. As the barges came nearer Iput could very well hear the sweet female voices singing divine verses and hymns.

Now the life size golden Amun statue became clearly visible, carefully dressed in full ornate



One of two unique square columns representing Upper & Lower Egypt situated after the 6<sup>th</sup> pylon gate.



One of the restored columns in front of the 2<sup>nd</sup> pylon gate.



Obelisk erected by Sethos II situated close to the sphinx alley in front of the main pylon entrance gate to the Karnak temple complex; the top was covered with a gold pyramid-shaped cap in antiquity.



Today there are only 2 major obelisks left at Karnak; the second most important is that erected by Tuthmosis I with a height of 20m and weighing up to 130 tons; in antiquity there were 4 obelisks of Tuthmosis I & III at Karnak.



with all its insignia reflecting the sun light in all directions, as the silver plated barge moved slowly in the waves upstream. Ramses was gracefully holding the rudder always wearing the red and white double crown called shemty and representing the joint rule over Upper and Lower Egypt. He had his arms crossed in the typical royal position with the heqat scepter as symbol of rule in his left hand and the sakhem as symbol of power in his right.

Next to the royal false long knotted beard he was also wearing the heavy golden ornamented collar on his bare chest and the knee long royal skirt with his name hieroglyph on his belt. On the other side next to Amun was standing the high priest dresses in leopard skin with a golden ram headed chain and the high priestess and divine wife of Amun, the most important roles in the Karnak temple city.

Behind them was queen Nefertari dressed in the typical long white robe with the black special formed long wig reserved for the queen crowned by a golden headband with the typical raised cobra in ready to strike pose. In her hand she was holding a palm leaf stick with twenty eight leaves indicating exactly the number of years of her husband's reign. The opet festivities lasted for three weeks and today on the most important day the big feast was held after the sun set prayer with ample free food and drink including music and dancing. This was the annual high light of every workers hard life".

This description captures very closely the research results of ancient Egyptian ceremonies during the month long opet festivities. But there are 2 smaller temple complexes in Karnak, which unfortunately have not been restored yet. The Luxor Mut temple is connected from the Karnak south gate with a separate sphinx alley. It was built by Amenhotep III at the end of his 37 year rule when he was fighting various illnesses. During his reign the pest raged and killed many. For this he erected 570 statues of his personal healing goddess lion headed Sechmet. This temple was surrounded by a unique horse shoe shaped lake and a perimeter wall. Little is left of his Malqata palace at West Thebes which might have been bigger than the Karnak temple complex. Only the famous Memnon colossi are left. New excavations have started and might bring more to light in a few years.

The Month temple area was the smallest of the three and was built to the north of Karnak. It featured to main temples for god Month and goddess Maat. Month is a son of primary sun god Re and the main god of all kings depicted with a falcon head, feathers, sun plate and two cobras. In his second capacity he as a war god he protected kings in battle and was shown with a khepesh sword.

Maat was the goddess of truth, justice, cosmic order and balance. Her importance and cult in the New Kingdom grew rapidly. She was shown with wings protecting the pharaoh and in her hieroglyph she was symbolized by a feather responsible to prevent chaos and seen as the divine sister of the ruling king and his success depended on him keeping the world with Maat's help in balance.

Another important task of Maat was to represent the counter balance for each deceased at his death trial, when his heart was weighted against Maat to evaluate if the deceased had led a good and sinless life.