
Karnak: Evolution of a Temple by Elizabeth Blyth

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Karnak is probably the most famous of the ancient Egyptian religious complexes. Visited every year by thousands of tourists, it has been for decades the focus of careful and painstaking archaeological work that continues to reveal new details on the long evolution of this important sacred site. Because of the vastness of the remains, of the necessarily dispersed and detailed nature of the archaeological records, and of many ancient pharaohs who unscrupulously demolished to the foundations earlier buildings that were in the way of their new plans, following the historical evolution of this temple is not an easy task. At least, not until Elisabeth Blyth wrote this extremely useful book.

In a single, compact volume, the author summarizes in a comprehensive yet detailed way the history of Karnak from its uncertain origins through its period of splendor until its decline towards the end of the Roman era. The structure of the book is strictly chronological (1. the early temple, 2. the New Kingdom, 3. the Late Period) and the result is particularly effective: obviously, the New Kingdom (the period to which most of the standing remains date) occupies a large portion of the book, but the earlier and later periods (the evidence of which is, in many cases, scantier and less visible) have been given equal attention by the author. As a result, the reader can truly follow the evolution of Karnak through over 30 centuries of history. Although mainstream Egyptology is an obvious target of this book, as we shall see below other contiguous areas of research may certainly benefit from this historical and architectural reconstruction.

The importance of Karnak resided in its being the contact point between the god Amun, the supreme ruler of the universe, and the pharaoh, the supreme ruler on Earth who represented all the Egypt-

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ian people [Introduction]. Thus, especially from the New Kingdom onwards, every king who wished to be remembered forever was virtually compelled to contribute to the splendor of this most important temple [33 ff.]. In this respect, Karnak is a faithful mirror of the historical events that happened from the Middle Kingdom onwards: the complex political and religious changes that took place during and immediately after the so-called Amarna period, for instance, are clearly reflected by the equally tormented building phases of the temple.

It may be worth analyzing this example in detail by comparing historical events and building activities. Amenhotep IV, son of Amenhotep III, a few years after his accession abandoned the traditional polytheism (that gave power and wealth to a large number of priests) and opted for a cult centered on the Aten, the Sun-disk (that, very conveniently, communicated only with the king). He changed his name into Akhenaten and founded a new capital in Middle Egypt (at Amarna) called Akhetaten, 'The Horizon of the Sun-Disk', where he built new temples dedicated to Aten, characterized by a deeply innovative design. After his death, his designated successor reigned only a couple of years and was soon followed by the young Tut-ankh-aten, closely watched by the older Ay and Horemheb. The young king soon abandoned Akhetaten, moved back to Thebes, changed his name into Tut-ankh-amun, and fully restored the old religious cult, no doubt heavily influenced by his older mentors. A radical *damnatio memoriae* fell over Akhenaten, his religion and his achievements. After the premature death of Tutankhamun, the power was taken for a short time by Ay, who must have been already old, and then by Horemheb. The latter reigned for about 30 years, but some inscriptions suggest that at some point he started to count the years of his reign from the death of Amenhotep III, thus attributing to himself all the regnal years of Amenhotep IV-Akhenaten, Tutankhamun, and Ay: in this way, the 'problematic' period (including the lack of linearity in the succession to the throne, since Horemheb was not of royal blood) was completely swallowed by the newly-restored, old-style traditional system.

The temple of Karnak fully reflects all these events. In the earliest years of his reign, before becoming Akhenaten, Amenhotep IV duly completed two monuments that his father had started within the sacred area and added some of his own. His taste for unconventional forms can be already detected from the extremely scant remains of

these buildings, which shared the same *damnatio memoriae* that befell their founder. They were so thoroughly destroyed—their stones were re-used as filling of later monuments—that we only have a faint and incomplete idea of their original position, outline, and size [118–126]. After the Amarna interlude, the young Tutankhamun set up a large stele at Karnak proclaiming the restoration of the ancient cult, and spent energy and wealth to restore the sacred complex [126–32]. Most of his achievements, however, were later usurped by Horemheb, who also flattened Akhenaten’s buildings and erected three monumental pylons in full traditional style [133–142]. It is clear that, at Karnak, history and architecture proceeded in parallel.

Interestingly enough, it is suspected that Horemheb conceived the entire plan of the large Hypostyle Hall (perhaps the most famous part of the temple) that fills the space between Second and Third Pylon. Even if Horemheb was not directly involved, the beginning of this major construction must have taken place within a few years anyway: Horemheb was followed by Ramses I, who reigned less than two years and left the throne to his son Seti I. Most of the Hypostyle Hall was certainly built under the latter king, who managed to complete the decoration of half of it; the rest was the work of his son and successor Ramses II [36, 143–157].

This means that Karnak must have rarely been a quiet place: all these events, from Akhenaten’s accession to the throne to the completion of the decoration of the Hypostyle Hall, took place in less than a century. Considering that erecting a stone building implied amassing large quantities of mudbricks and rubble to build construction ramps (and, of course, later dismantling them); that huge stone blocks had to be quarried, transported and lifted to their final position; that wooden scaffoldings had to be erected to decorate walls and columns; that disgraced buildings were not savagely pulled down but carefully dismantled in order to re-use their blocks; and that all these operations took place several times in the space of a century, one may conclude that, paradoxically, Karnak must have been quieter in periods when kings did not have enough power and wealth to embark on the construction of their own additions to the sacred site.¹

¹ Compare, for instance, the difference between the five centuries corresponding to the New Kingdom and those corresponding to the Third Intermediate Period, chapters 4 to 13 *vs.* chapters 14 and 15.

During the most splendid periods, instead, clouds of dust, mountains of mud, forests of scaffoldings, cries of encouragement and the rhythmic noise of the stonecutters must have provided scenery and soundtrack to this most important Egyptian temple. Karnak was not simply a monument, it was a living symbol of the royal connection with the most important god and, as a consequence, of the royal power as a whole. As such, in practice it was also the busiest and most important working site of ancient Egypt, and may still offer new insights into the ancient practical and administrative organization. A study of how the successive buildings sites were organized within the older monuments, for instance, would find in this book a useful and reliable starting point. A complement to the archaeological excavations that must necessarily focus on the careful and extremely detailed study of small areas, this overview of the entire temple, beside being interesting and important on its own, may also provide the basis for future studies on its general layout, distribution, and internal organization.