

A visit to the Amun Temple of Karnak



by

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Introduction

The Amun temple of Karnak (on the eastern bank of the Nile, near the modern town of Luxor in Middle Egypt) is the largest ancient Egyptian temple that can still be visited today. Around 2.000 BC, this was the site of only a modest temple, but the next twenty centuries saw it enlarged and embellished without end. The last major extension came in the 4th century BC, when a new, massive entrance building was constructed: the 1st pylon. This was incorporated into a mud-brick enclosure wall, 13 meters across at its base, over 20 meters high.¹ It defined henceforward the perimeter of the Amun precinct, roughly 500 x 600 meters: an area of 30 hectares (75 acres).

For orientating oneself in this huge complex, its ten monumental gateway buildings or pylons offer a convenient means of reference (see the plan on the next page). Their modern numbering however (from 1st till 10th pylon) is derived from the order in which one would see them during a visit - as we will shortly. It does not reflect the order in which they were constructed.

The complex consists of two axes.

- A primary axis runs from the 1st pylon till the Back Temple. 100 meters across, 300 meters long, it encompasses an area of 3 hectares (7.5 acres).
- The secondary axis runs from the 10th pylon (65 meters wide) to a point midway the primary axis: a distance of 265 meters. It consists of a series of pylons and open courts, designed as a grandiose décor for lavish, opulent processions to and from the temple.

In the right angle between both axes lies the Sacred Lake: a magnificent, rectangular pond, 75 x 125 meters: almost 1 hectare large. Over the rest of the premises, a host of smaller temples, chapels and auxiliary buildings are strewn.

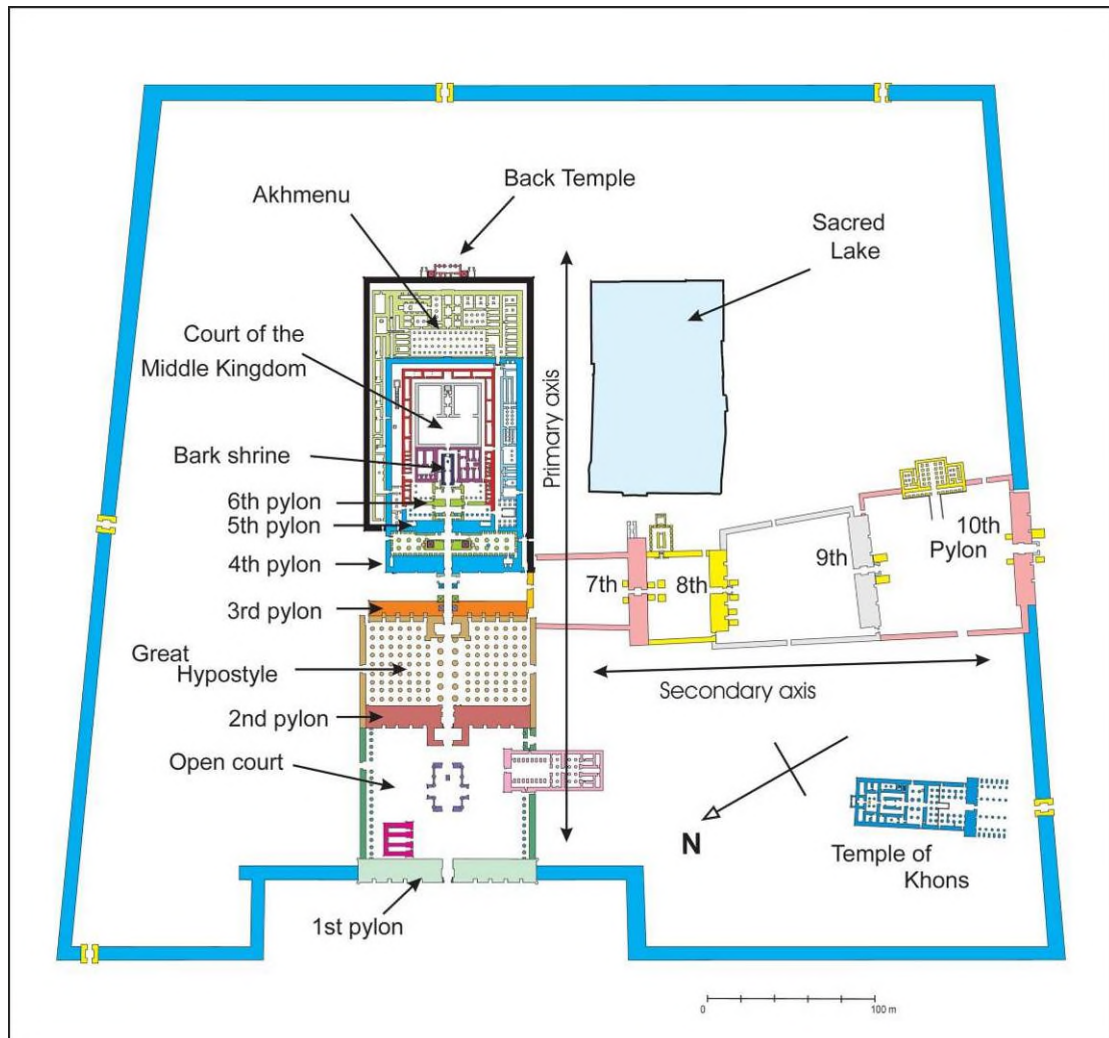
For the ancient Egyptians, a temple was the house of a god. The master of this house was the god Amun, who resided here together with his wife Mut, and their son Khons. Mut also had a temple of her own, about half a kilometer to the south. In the south-western corner of the Amun compound, Khons occupied a smaller temple.

The word "Karnak" comes from an Arab expression, meaning "fortified village". It was the name that the modern Egyptians gave to the walled-in temple complex. In antiquity, the city to which this temple belonged was called Waset (after the nome or province which capital it was) or just Niwt, meaning: "The City".² It has however become better known under the name that was given to it by the Greeks: Thebes.

¹ Arnold 22. Today, most of this wall is reduced to mounds of rubble - or gone altogether.

² Bonnet 791-2.

During the time that Amun was the most important god of Egypt (roughly from 2.000 till 1.000 BC), Thebes was Egypt's capital - and this temple was the focal point of a nation's pride and gratitude.



The Amun complex at Karnak



1. The Temple Proper

1.1. Access to the temple: the avenue of sphinxes, and the 1st pylon

It was customary to don the access road to a temple with a double row of sphinxes. The various temples of Thebes once were connected by a network of procession roads, fitted with a total of more than 1200 sphinxes: each almost 2 meters long, on a 1.5 meters high pedestal of stone.³



A sphinx is a compound creature: it has the body of a lion, with the head of a man,⁴ or - less often - of a ram or a falcon. The sphinx with a man's head is a manifestation of the king. It articulates the notion that the king possesses the might and power of a lion. The sphinxes in front of the Amun temple of Karnak have a ram's head. The ram was a manifestation of the god Amun. In the ram-sphinx, the being of the king is fused with that of the god Amun.

³ Arnold 114-5.

⁴ The alternative rendering with the head of a woman is a modern fabrication (with some Freudian overtones).



Under the ram's chin stands a small effigy of the king, who in this way is under the god's protection. (Viewed in isolation, the ram-sphinx is an amalgamation of the king and the god. But when contrasted to an image of the king, it becomes the god. Shifts in meaning, resulting from a shift in perspective, are characteristic for the primitive mind).





The 1st pylon serves as gateway to the temple. It is 110 meters wide, and at its base 15 meters across. Imposing as it is, it was never completed though. It never reached its intended height of more than 40 meters - with the left wing lagging considerably behind. Its exterior has therefore remained rough-hewn (except for a few meters on either side of the doorway) and it lacks the usual reliefs.



The doorway in the 1st pylon:
entrance to the temple.

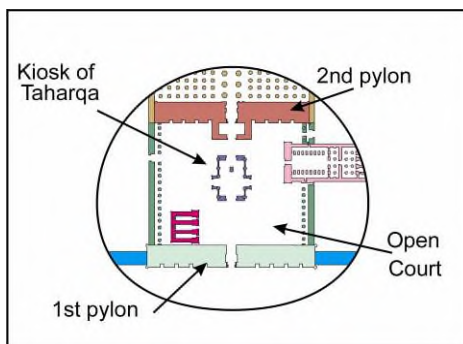


On the backside of the 1st pylon, we can see (to the right) the remains of a ramp that served as scaffolding during construction. It was made of a checkerboard pattern of mud-brick walls, filled in with sand and gravel. Over this ramp, the huge blocks of stone were hauled up.

Since the pylon was never finished, the ramp was never taken down. It was simply left to weather away.



1.2. The open court



Behind the 1st pylon lies a large, open court: 100 meters wide, 80 meters deep. On both sides, it has a gallery - originally roofed - with a single line of columns.

The court features several other structures, a/o the Kiosk of Taharqa.



A view over the open court, seen from the entrance in the 1st pylon. To the left one of the columned galleries. The crumbly wall behind the palm trees is what's left of the 2nd pylon.