Introduction

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-Ra.

The Amun-Ra complex at Karnak encompasses a dizzying number of pylons, courts, pillared and columned halls, bark shrines and even small separate
temples. A huge mud brick temenos wall encloses the Amun-Ra precinct today; a series of earlier walls (with smaller footprints) have been identified through excavations at the temple. Three major processional ways have been discovered leading out from the precinct: each of these monumental paths lined with stone sphinx statues was involved in the procession of the divine image to neighboring temples, as the whole of Thebes became part of the ritual landscape during festival occasions.

In the Egyptian language, the temple of Amun is usually referred to as Per-Amun, or “the house of Amun.” In many ways, the temple indeed played the role of the god’s abode on earth. Here, the god’s statue was provided daily with food, drink, and sweet smelling incense and oils. But the god’s house was much more than a mere dwelling; it also included an estate – agricultural lands both around the temple and in other parts of the country – that supplied it with resources. While much of the land around the Karnak temples has not yet been excavated, storehouses, aviaries, production centers for food and drink, animal slaughter areas, and homes for priests have been uncovered, showing that the temples managed a system of production and consumption for its own goods and services. Documents from a variety of periods show that the Amun temple was also involved in a larger, regional network of land ownership and taxation that brought in a substantial amount of wealth to the temple.

Formal archaeological work started at central Karnak in 1895 and is ongoing today. The temple is now one of the best-documented and most frequently discussed ancient Egyptian sites.

About the Model

The Digital Karnak Project has recreated more than 60 structures from Karnak in a real time three-dimensional Virtual Reality model. These architectural features include obelisks, temples, pylons, courts, shrines, enclosure walls, and even a lake. Each building, and its multiple phases of construction, modification and destruction has been reconstructed based on plans and drawings published by Egyptologists. Great effort was made to incorporate the most current available research, and the webpage for each structure includes a detailed description and bibliography of sources for each recreation.

One of the major highlights of the model is the opportunity to watch the temple’s growth through time – moving reign by reign, the model depicts the temple from its earliest hypothesized form in the Middle Kingdom through the Greco-Ptolemaic Period, allowing us to visualize how the buildings and sacred space changed during the temple’s 1500 year lifetime.
It should be stressed that the model (in both the accompanying videos and the lower-quality model posted on Google Earth) represents the state of our knowledge today about the form of the temple. The model cannot show us Karnak “as it really was,” because we will never know everything about a site so ancient. Our goal has been to faithfully recreate the scholastic interpretations of each element of the site, interpretations which themselves will have flaws. Many details have been left out, and many elements of the basic architecture of the recreated buildings are based on hypotheses and conjecture. What the model does offer is an approximation of how buildings may have looked (in a very general way) and a chance to tour through and interact with this recreated space.

As it is, new information gained through ongoing excavations at Karnak will most definitely change our understanding of the precinct, and the model will need to be continually modified to reflect the new “reality.”

Further reading


