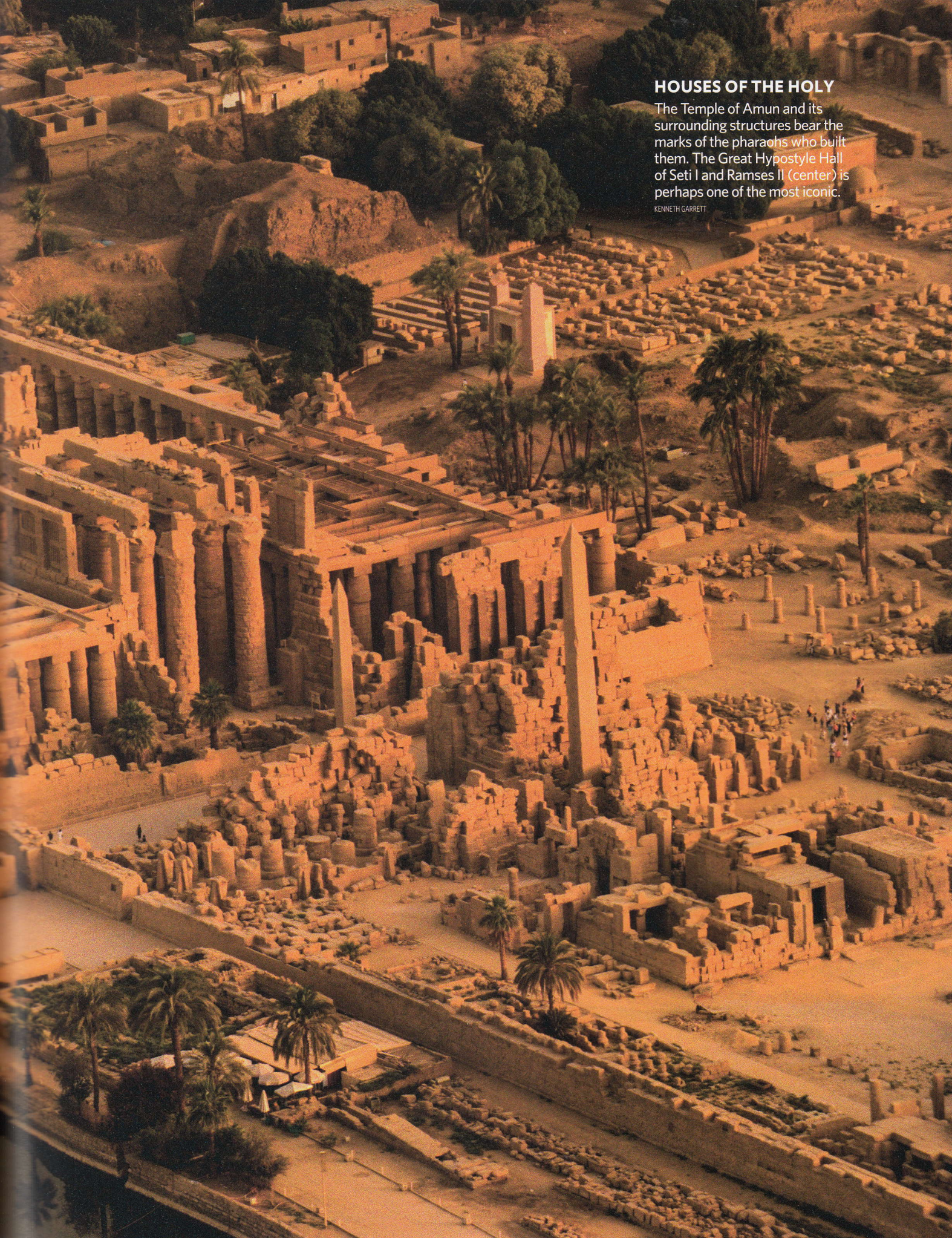


# ADORING AMUN

## SACRED RITUALS AT KARNAK

For millennia, the temple complex at Karnak stood at the spiritual center of Egypt, where priests performed sacred rituals to honor Amun, the powerful god on whom the pharaohs' fortunes depended.

ELISA CASTEL



## HOUSES OF THE HOLY

The Temple of Amun and its surrounding structures bear the marks of the pharaohs who built them. The Great Hypostyle Hall of Seti I and Ramses II (center) is perhaps one of the most iconic.

KENNETH GARRETT



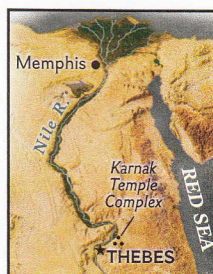
## TEMPLE COMPLEX

Karnak's sacred spaces (above) extend from its first pylon all the way to the obelisk of Hatshepsut.

KENNETH GARRETT

Every day at dawn more than 3,000 years ago, at the height of Egypt's New Kingdom, the high priest of Amun, also called the "first prophet," bathed in the sacred lake of the Temple of Karnak at Thebes. Then, followed by servants carrying trays of food, he would approach the *naos*, the shrine containing a statue of Amun, Egypt's state god.

It was a tense moment: The god could strike down the high priest. To avoid this fate, he would deliver a series of prayers, humbling himself before the god and praising Amun's name. These daily rituals continued for millenia in the hallowed halls of Karnak.



This sacred space occupied the northern part of the ancient city of Thebes. The modern name of Karnak is derived from the Arabic term meaning "fortified town," but the ancient Egyptians called the site Ipet-Isut, meaning "chosen of places." Dominated by the temple complexes of Amun, his consort,

Mut, and their son, Khons, Karnak spreads across roughly 250 acres, comprising one of the largest religious sites anywhere in the world.

### A New Dawn

Beginning in the 1800s, excavations at Karnak revealed a rich repository of 2,000 years



## MAKING THEIR MARK

### CA 1870 B.C.

**SENWOSRET I** builds a chapel at Karnak, a site already sacred to Amun. The chapel will later be demolished, and its stones repurposed.

### 1493-1482 B.C.

**THUTMOSE I** builds pylons and a retaining wall at Karnak. These works reflect the growing national importance of Thebes and Amun.

### 1473-1426 B.C.

**HATSHEPSUT** builds a red quartzite chapel to house the sacred barks, which her heir, Thutmose III, demolishes and replaces with his own.

**GOLDEN GOD.** AMUN STATUE FROM KARNAK, TENTH TO EIGHTH CENTURY B.C. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

SCALA, FLORENCE

## GODS AND KINGS

In the Temple of Amun at Karnak, the god Amun-Re wears a double crown symbolizing Upper and Lower Egypt. The god stands next to a king, whose face is badly damaged. Inscriptions identify him as Ramses II, one of the many pharaohs who built at Karnak.

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### 1290-1213 B.C.

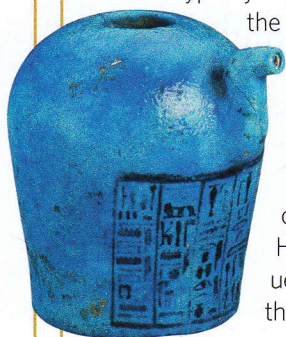
**SETI I** begins the Great Hypostyle Hall, consisting of 134 pillars. He dies before its completion, leaving his son, Ramses II, to complete it.

### 1104-1075 B.C.

**RAMSES XI** rules as the last king of the New Kingdom. Instability will weaken Thebes, but Amun will be worshipped there for many centuries to come.

# PHARAONIC RENOVATIONS

**MANY PHARAOKHS** who ruled during the New Kingdom based their administration in Thebes and exercised power from there. As church and state were intertwined, Egyptian rulers expressed their piety by embellishing the Temple of Amun at Karnak. The complex grew to include a porticoed courtyard, a hypostyle hall, two small courtyards with obelisks, and the inner sanctum. The main axis of the temple (shown here, facing roughly west to east) was modified by pharaohs, who made both their own additions and tore down their predecessors' monuments. Perhaps the most egregious was Thutmose III, who leveled the contributions to Karnak of his predecessor, Hatshepsut. This renovation process continued past the time of the New Kingdom through the reign of Taharqa in the seventh century B.C.

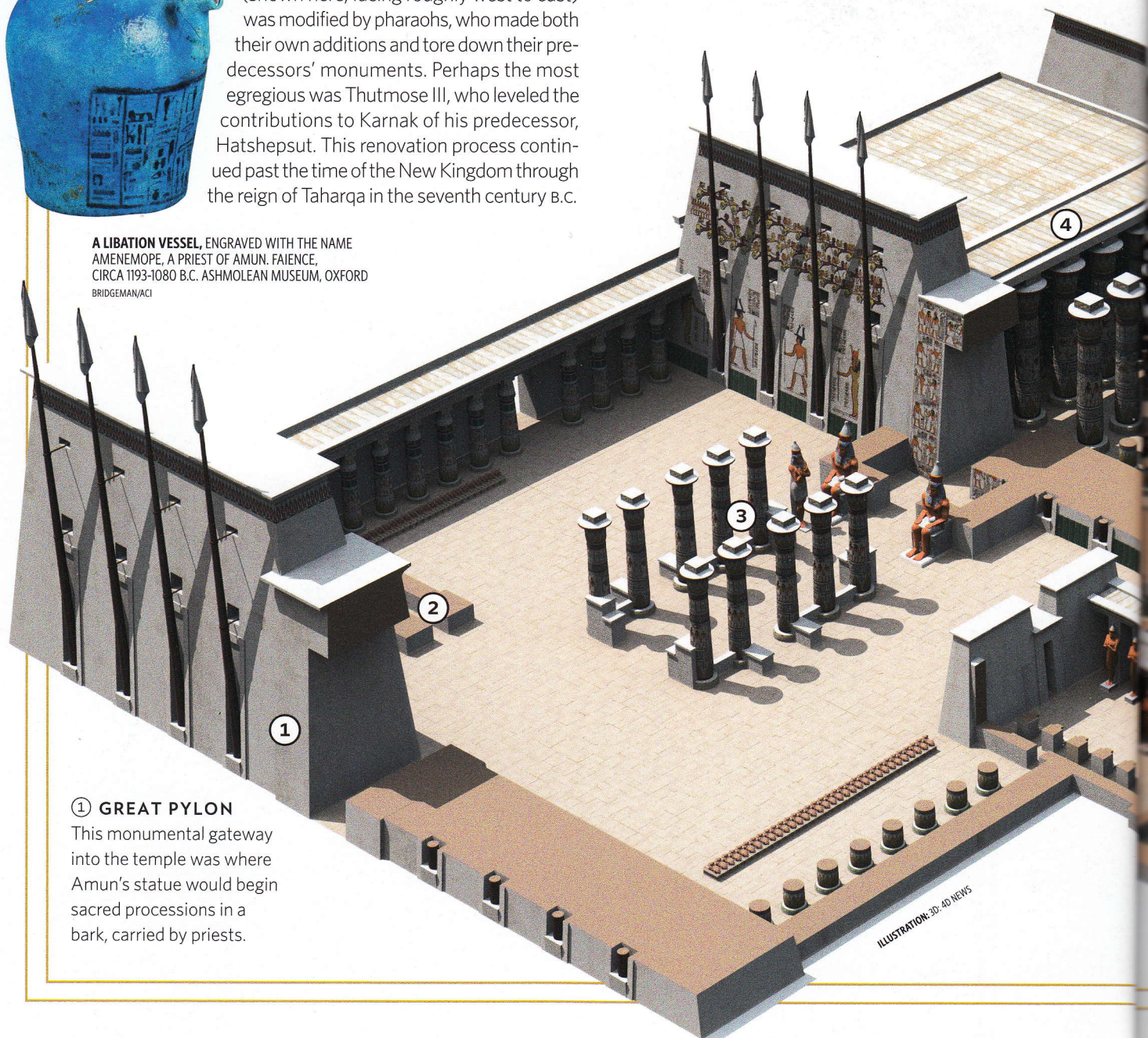


**A LIBATION VESSEL**, ENGRAVED WITH THE NAME AMENEMOPE, A PRIEST OF AMUN. FAIENCE, CIRCA 1193-1080 B.C. ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, OXFORD

BRIDGEMAN/ACI

## ④ GREAT HYPOSTYLE HALL

Perhaps Karnak's best known feature, this massive hall was begun by Pharaoh Seti I and finished by his son, Ramses II. The hall was so large that some estimate that it could accommodate Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral.



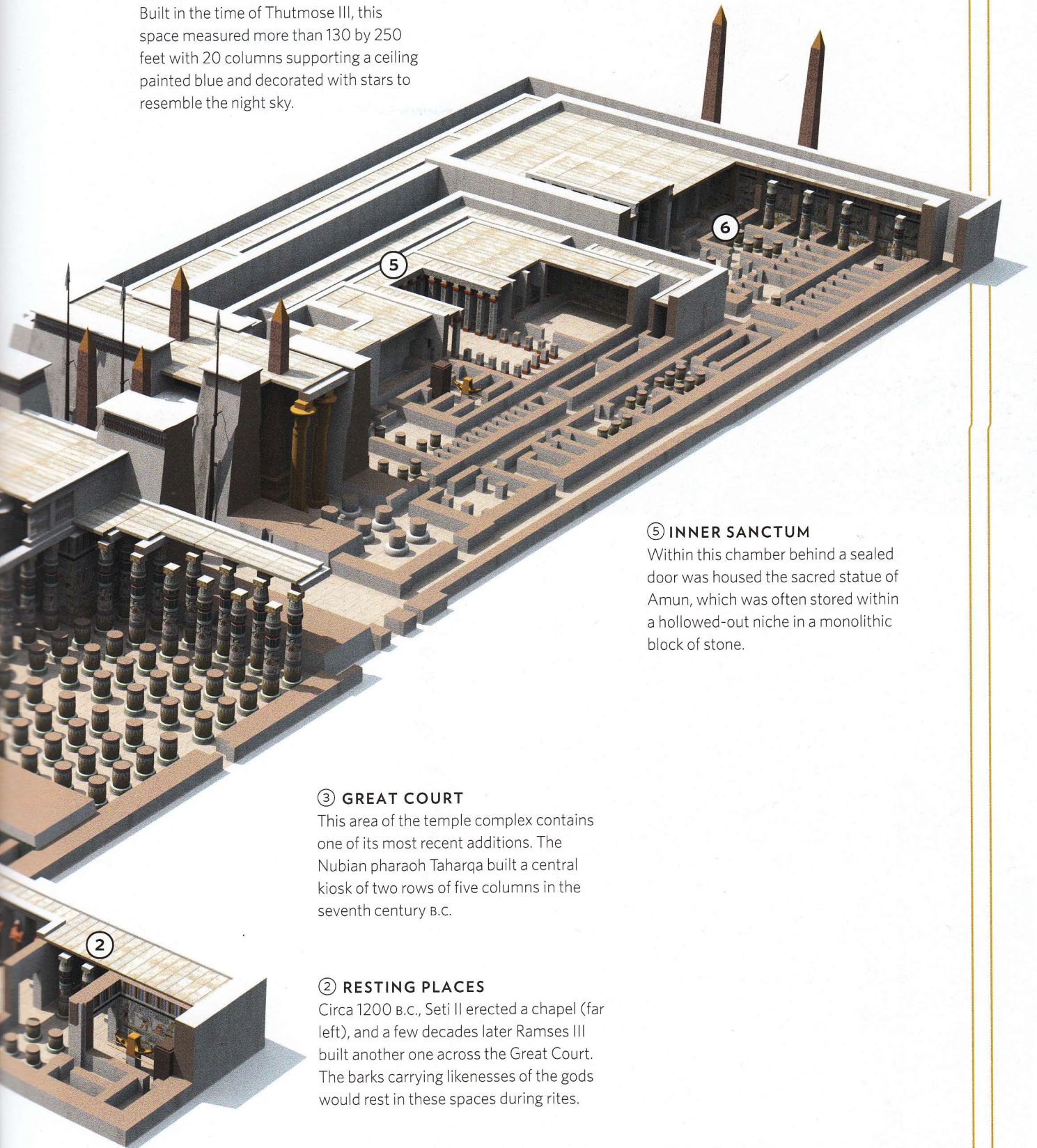
## ① GREAT PYLON

This monumental gateway into the temple was where Amun's statue would begin sacred processions in a bark, carried by priests.

ILLUSTRATION: 3D NEWS

### ⑥ FESTIVAL HALL

Built in the time of Thutmose III, this space measured more than 130 by 250 feet with 20 columns supporting a ceiling painted blue and decorated with stars to resemble the night sky.



### ⑤ INNER SANCTUM

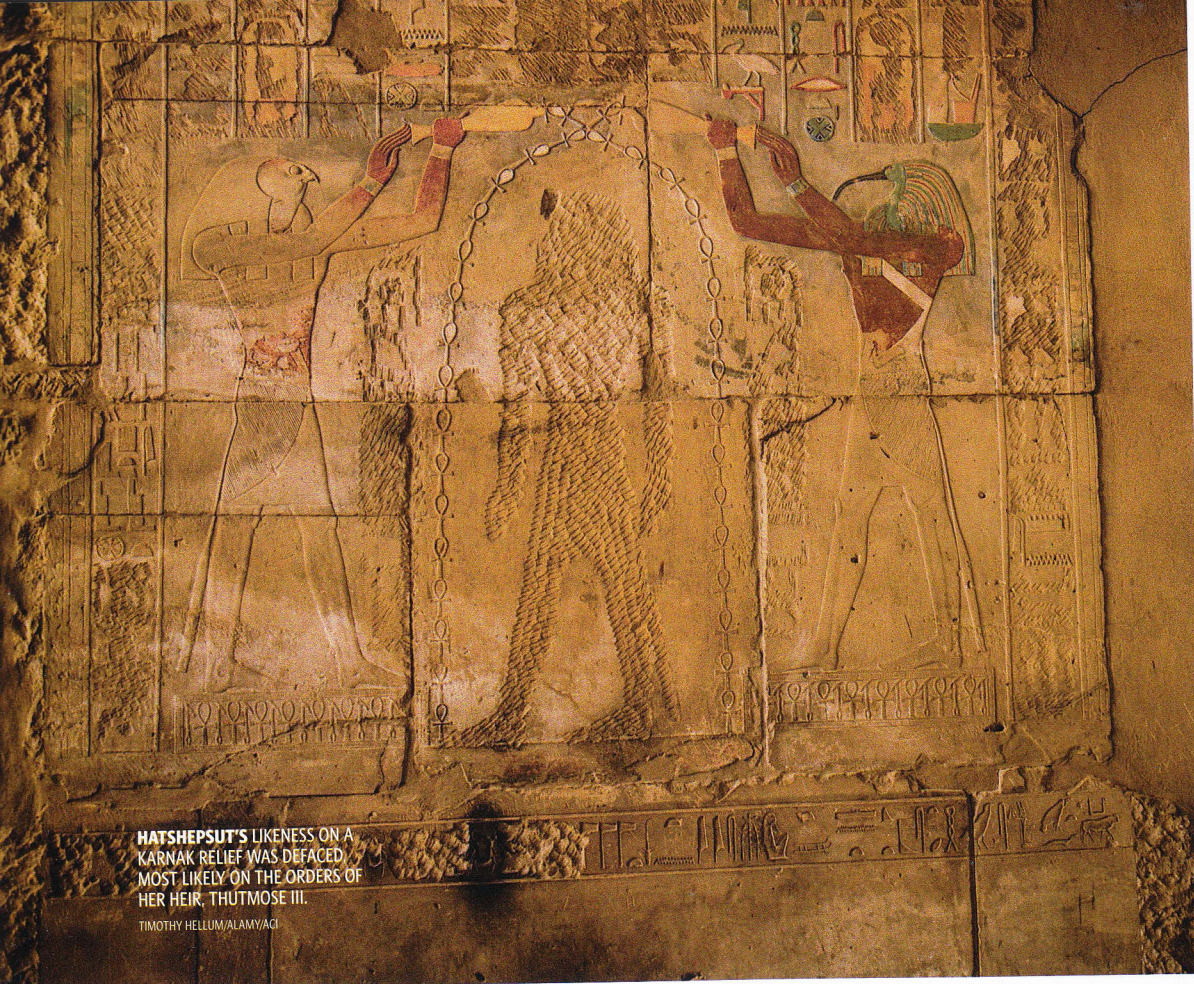
Within this chamber behind a sealed door was housed the sacred statue of Amun, which was often stored within a hollowed-out niche in a monolithic block of stone.

### ③ GREAT COURT

This area of the temple complex contains one of its most recent additions. The Nubian pharaoh Taharqa built a central kiosk of two rows of five columns in the seventh century B.C.

### ② RESTING PLACES

Circa 1200 B.C., Seti II erected a chapel (far left), and a few decades later Ramses III built another one across the Great Court. The barks carrying likenesses of the gods would rest in these spaces during rites.



**HATSHEPSUT'S LIKENESS ON A KARNAK RELIEF WAS DEFACTED MOST LIKELY ON THE ORDERS OF HER HEIR, THUTMOSE III.**

TIMOTHY HELLUM/ALAMY/ACI

of Egyptian history. A shrine to the god Amun was first built at the site around 2000 B.C. More than a century later Pharaoh Senwosret I built a jubilee shrine there, a sign of the site's increasing significance. Nevertheless, it took a major political shift to exalt Amun to the most important god of the Egyptian pantheon.

In the middle of the second millennium B.C., a long period of disunity came to an end in Egypt.

The Theban pharaoh Ahmose I expelled an occupying people known as the Hyksos around 1539 B.C., reuniting Upper and Lower Egypt under the same crown for the first time in a century. He became the first king of the so-called 18th dynasty, who ruled their kingdom from Thebes.

As political and spiritual power were closely linked in

ancient Egypt, Thebes also became a spiritual center focused on the worship of Amun. One powerful pharaoh after another left their mark on the temple complex at Karnak, and sacred rituals developed to ensure divine favor for the pharaoh, and the protection of the state.

One of the most important rites was a procession centered on the sacred boat (or bark) of Amun. A female pharaoh, Hatshepsut (ca 1508-1458 B.C.), created major structures there that served as both her living quarters and a shrine for the sacred barks. Her heir, Thutmose III, built the temple's sacred lake as well as reliefs depicting plants brought back from his imperial expansion into Syria.

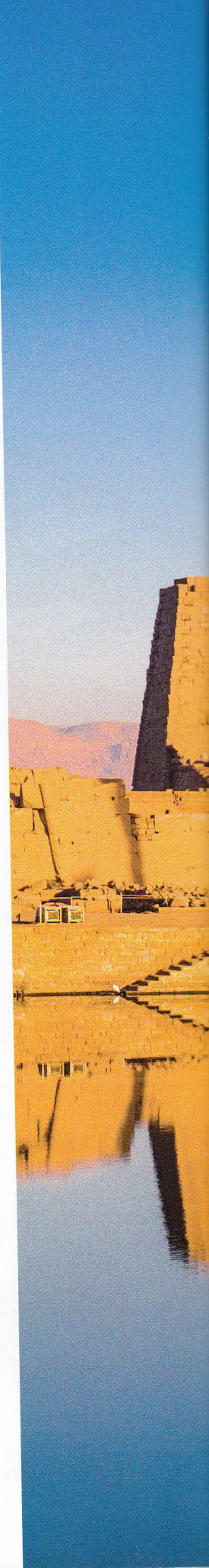
During the 19th dynasty in the 13th century B.C., more massive monuments rose to the west of Hatshepsut's complex, crowned by the mighty Great Hypostyle Hall with its 134 columns. These works were begun by Seti I and completed by his son Ramses II.

### A Living Temple

Amun first emerged as a lesser god to a Theban creation deity. His name means "the hidden one," and his divine dominion was rather open-ended. Historians theorize that this enabled him



**AANEN, SECOND PRIEST OF AMUN, SERVED DURING THE REIGN OF AMENHOTEP III. 14TH-CENTURY B.C. STATUE. EGYPTIAN MUSEUM, TURIN, ITALY** ALAMY/ACI



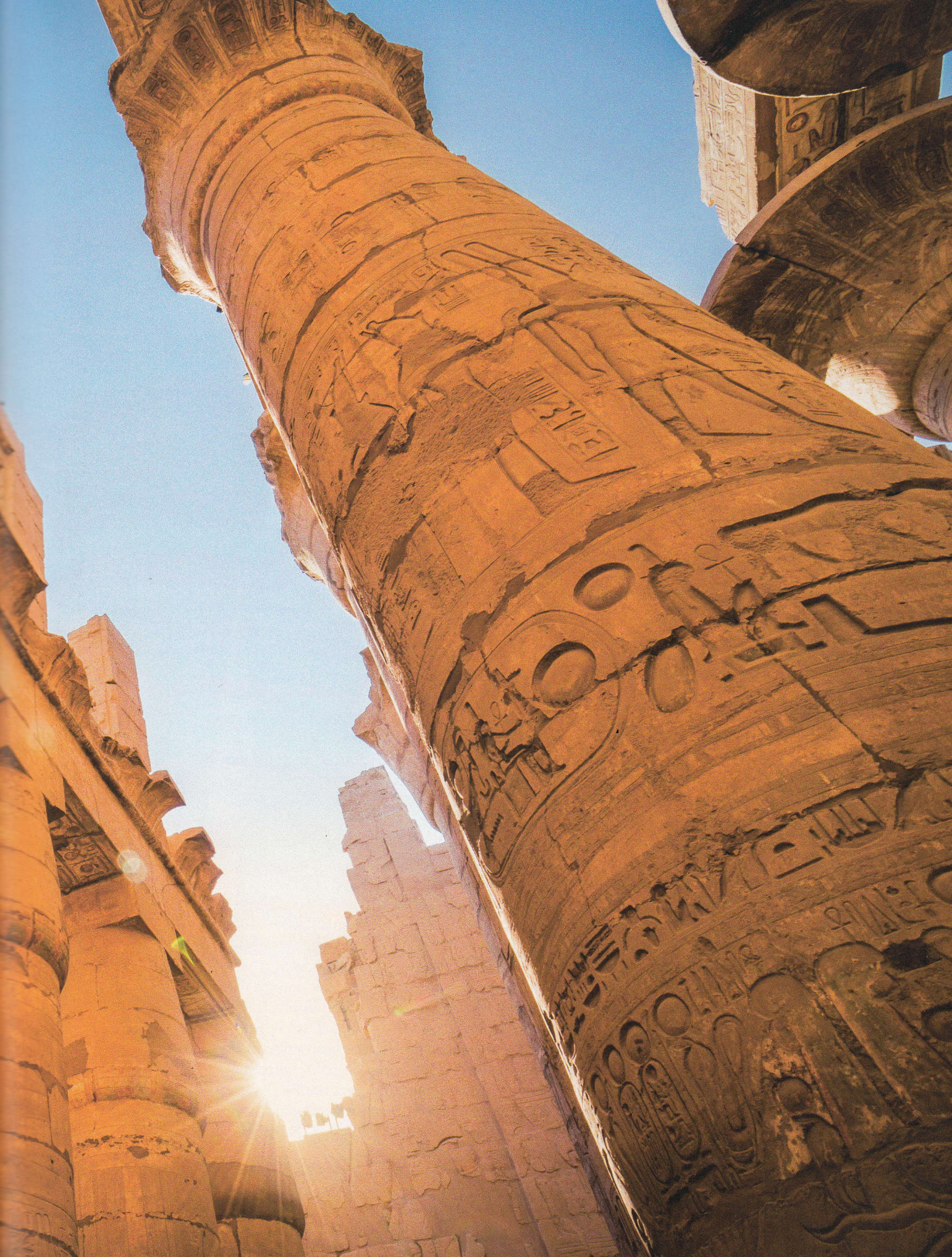
## MYTHS AND COLUMNS

Decorated with reliefs, the columns in Karnak's Great Hypostyle Hall were built by Seti I and his son Ramses II in the 13th century B.C. They echo a creation myth, in which a papyrus grove grows around an island that emerged from Nun, the primordial sea.

J. BANKS/AWL IMAGES







# AMUN ACROSS THE CENTURIES

**THE EGYPTIAN MUSEUM** of Berlin holds three papyri from Karnak that contain valuable details about the cult of Amun and his consort Mut and son Khons. The documents date to the beginning of the 10th century B.C. and are written in hieratic script (a simplified hieroglyphic writing), using black ink with red headings. Arranged in 37 columns, the ritual related to Amun is divided into 66 stages, with a title, an explanation of the rite's purpose, and prayers and recitations. At Abydos, the Temple of Seti I has scenes from the daily offering ritual that date to the 13th century B.C. Although the Abydos depictions are not identical to those from Karnak, they appear to have the same intentions. Even though three centuries separate these writings, remarkable consistency is shown across time.



## ROYAL OFFERING

A relief from the temple of Pharaoh Seti I at Abydos (left) shows the sovereign making offerings to the god Amun.

SHUTTERSTOCK

to embody more aspects of creation and absorb different divine characteristics. This ability to adapt allowed him to rise to the head of the local pantheon in Thebes, where he was worshipped with his consort, Mut, and their son, Khons.

As he acquired greater national power, Amun was incorporated into a parallel triad, consisting of the solar deity Re—with whom he is often combined as Amun-Re—and the creator god, Ptah. Nurtured through the dark days of the Hyksos occupation of Lower Egypt, his cult

rose in tandem with the fortunes of Thebes at the dawn of the New Kingdom. As the Theban pharaohs became increasingly powerful, Amun gained sufficient stature to become Egypt's supreme deity.

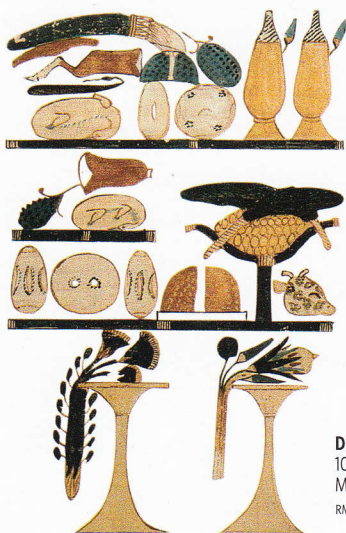
By the end of the New Kingdom, several thousand people

worked at Karnak, consisting of an elite priesthood and servants. Some of the rituals were performed during annual rituals such as the Opet festival, in which the bark of Amun was taken upriver to the Temple of Luxor.

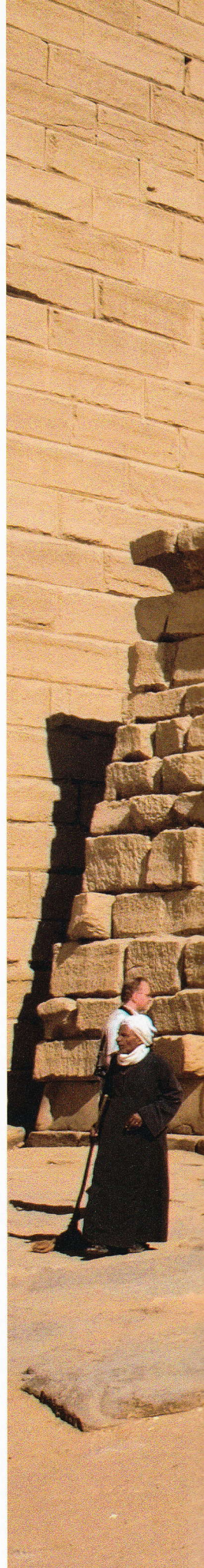
Other rituals had to be performed daily and were thought essential for maintaining cosmic order. These included the daily offering ritual, detailed in the papyri manuscripts from the 10th century B.C., now held by the Egyptian Museum of Berlin. Although the rites described in the papyri date to circa 1539 B.C., they are likely to be similar to those performed in the time of Seti I and Ramses II in the 13th century B.C. when Egypt was at the height of its imperial power.

The Berlin Papyri recount how, having broken the clay seal, the first prophet opened the naos containing the statue of Amun, prostrated himself, and kissed the ground. Then he reassured the god that nothing had been stolen from him, and no mischief had occurred: "Hail to you, Amun-Ra, Lord of the thrones of the Two Lands. I have done nothing with your secretions, I have not removed your dignity; I have not shaped your skin for another God."

The priests would present trays of food to Amun, including such offerings as fresh fruit,



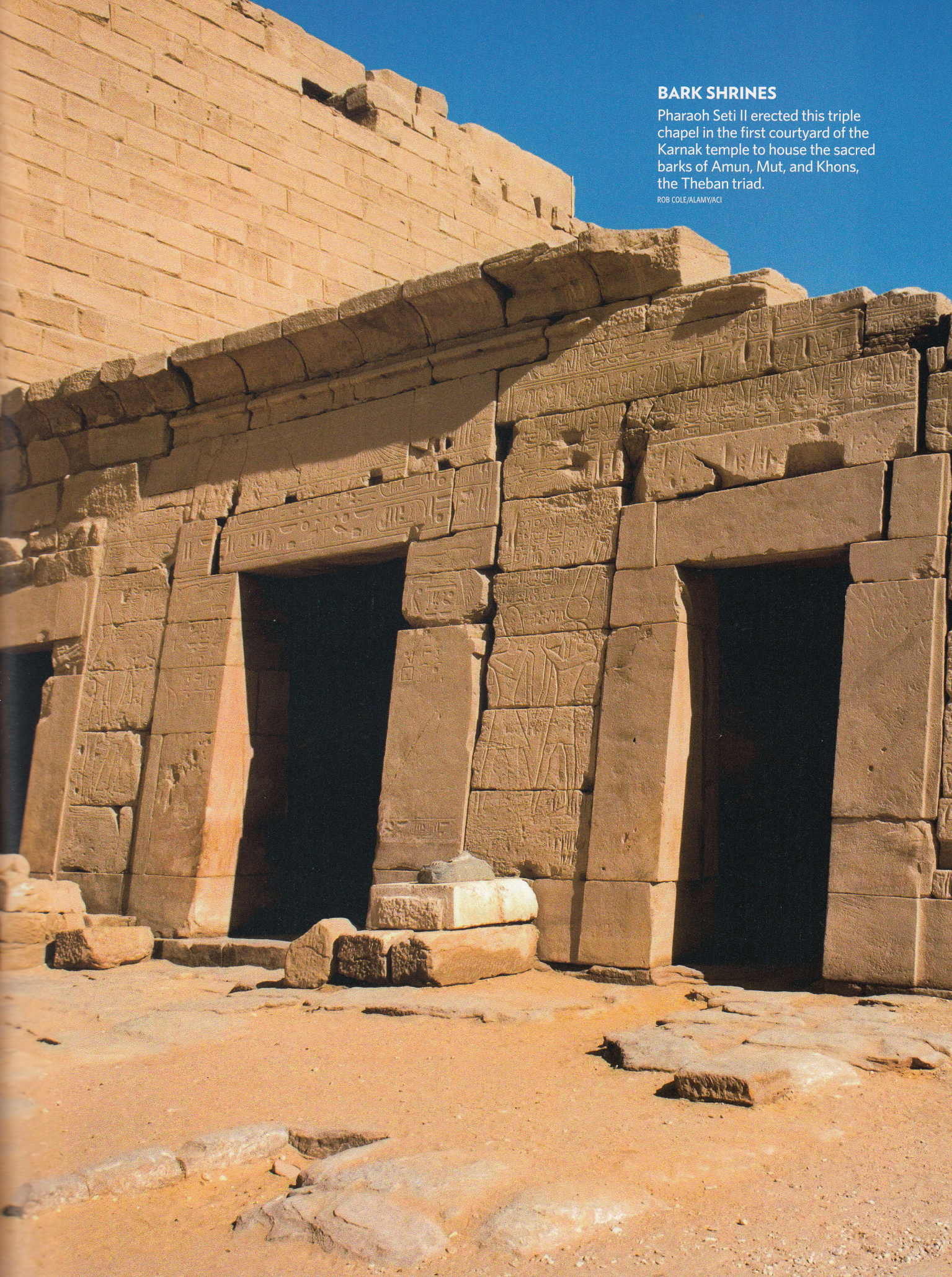
**DIVINE OFFERINGS.** PAPYRUS, 10TH CENTURY B.C. BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON  
RMN/GRAND PALAIS



## BARK SHRINES

Pharaoh Seti II erected this triple chapel in the first courtyard of the Karnak temple to house the sacred barks of Amun, Mut, and Khons, the Theban triad.

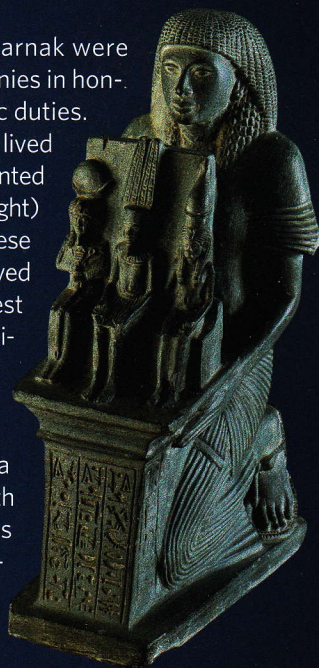
ROB COLE/ALAMY/ACI



# rites and responsibilities

**THE PRIESTS** at the Temple of Amun at Karnak were responsible not only for the sacred ceremonies in honor of Amun and his family, but also for civic duties. Ramessenakht, a first prophet of Amun who lived toward the end of the 20th dynasty, is represented as the largest figure in a black granite statue (right) who presents the holy family. In addition to these pious duties, Ramessenakht was heavily involved in other aspects of state power: Records attest he led a complex and lucrative quarrying expedition to the desert. His sons, also high priests at Karnak, were closely involved in administering royal lands and the taxation system. The growing power of the priests of Amun led to a growing crisis in Thebes; by the end of the 20th dynasty in 1075 B.C., the power of the priests would outstrip that of the pharaohs, precipitating the end of the New Kingdom.

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poultry and beef, legumes, breads, water, milk, wine, beer, and honey. Amun, it was believed, later consumed the food's essence. Each day, the statue would be adorned with garments. In the mornings, priests would remove the prior day's clothing and then replace them with new attire.

Reliefs on the walls of the temple at Karnak include depictions of the statue's clothes in the form of linen bindings of different colors: white as an emblem of purity; blue representing water and sky; green for health and vitality; and red for blood and strength. As well as the linen robe, the priest applied makeup and perfume and adorned the statue with gold necklaces, pectorals, and bracelets from Karnak's treasury, as well as the divine insignia.

After Amun had been fed and clothed and the proper prayers uttered, the naos would be resealed. Facing forward so as not to turn his back to Amun, the first prophet walked backward toward the exit, sweeping the floor as he went, to erase any footprints he may have left.

## Priests Versus Pharaohs

The cult of Amun had risen with the New Kingdom and would later factor in its decline as

tensions grew among different powerful factions. Following Ramses II and his immediate heirs and successors, succession crises weakened the New Kingdom and Theban rule. Part of this process was hastened by a power struggle between the pharaohs and the Amun priesthood at Karnak, who started to intervene more and more in the secular affairs of state.

After Ramses XI died in 1075 B.C., Egypt entered a 400-year era of instability, now called the Third Intermediate Period. During the 21st dynasty, power shifted to the city of Tanis in northern Egypt.

Pharaohs would, nevertheless, continue to build new structures at Karnak. The last was raised in the seventh century B.C. by Pharaoh Taharqa of the 25th dynasty. Even after this last major addition, the worship of Amun would endure for centuries more at the ancient temple. The cult would only formally end in the fourth century A.D., when Roman emperors ordered the closing of pagan temples, bringing to an end a pattern of worship that had lasted for more than two millennia. ■

EGYPTOLOGIST **ELISA CASTEL** RESEARCHES AND WRITES ON EGYPTIAN MYTHOLOGY AND WRITING SYSTEMS.

## AVENUE OF AMUN

The ram was sacred to Amun, who was sometimes depicted with a ram's head. These ram-headed sphinxes line an approach to his temple at Karnak.

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