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Antonio Beato,
Entrance to the Temple of Khonsu at Karnak, ca. 1870-1880

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ANTONIO BEATO

(ca. 1825 – 1906)

COLONNADE OF THE TEMPLE OF ISIS AT PHILAE, CA. 1870-1880

Signed in negative: 'A. Beato.';
Numbered and titled in French in pencil in the reverse.

Albumen print
24.5 x 34 cm; (9.5 x 13 in.)

Provenance

Private Collection, England.

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Antonio Beato's *Entrance to the Temple of Khonsu at Karnak* belongs to the most accomplished body of nineteenth-century photographic documentation of ancient Egypt, transforming the monumental remains of Pharaonic architecture into precise yet atmospheric images for an international audience. Dating to approximately 1870–80, the photograph records the entrance to the Temple of Khonsu within the vast Precinct of Amun-Re at Karnak, presenting an architectural ensemble in which successive phases of Egyptian history remained visibly superimposed upon one another. Beato's image is consequently as much a document of the historical stratification of Karnak as it is a study of monumental architecture.

The Temple of Khonsu was principally constructed under Ramesses III during the Twentieth Dynasty, upon the site of an earlier sanctuary. Dedicated to Khonsu, the moon god and son of Amun and Mut, the temple formed part of the complex religious landscape of Karnak. Like the wider precinct, however, its appearance was not fixed at the moment of its original construction. Subsequent rulers continued to modify and embellish the sanctuary, demonstrating the characteristic continuity of Egyptian temple architecture in which later sovereigns incorporated themselves into an already ancient sacred environment. The resulting monument embodies a dialogue between New Kingdom tradition and later Ptolemaic intervention.

The architectural focus of Beato's photograph is the monumental gateway associated with the Ptolemaic period. Built under Ptolemy III Euergetes, this pylon marked the approach to the Temple of Khonsu and formed the southern terminus of a processional route extending towards Luxor. The gateway therefore operated not simply as an entrance but as a threshold between the profane exterior world and the sacred precinct. Its massive masonry and emphatically geometric form contrast with the repeated sculptural elements of the avenue beyond, producing the visual hierarchy characteristic of Egyptian temple approaches.

Beato exploits this architecture with considerable compositional intelligence. The gateway is presented frontally, its great planes of masonry establishing a commanding vertical and horizontal framework, while the avenue of ram-headed sphinxes introduces a powerful linear recession. The repeated forms create a measured rhythm that leads the eye towards the entrance, simultaneously conveying the extraordinary scale of the ancient complex. The sphinxes, associated with the protective and processional functions of Egyptian temple architecture, were themselves embodiments of royal and divine symbolism; the ram was particularly associated with Amun, the principal deity of the Karnak complex.

The photograph is particularly effective in its balance between archaeological specificity and visual drama. Beato does not merely isolate an architectural detail but preserves the relationship between gateway, avenue and surrounding landscape. The human presence, where discernible, provides a discreet indication of scale without competing with the monument itself. Such devices were characteristic of nineteenth-century Egyptian photography, in which the inclusion of figures could simultaneously animate the ancient landscape and communicate its overwhelming dimensions.

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The albumen process was especially suited to Beato's practice. Produced from a glass negative, the medium enabled the rendering of fine architectural detail alongside subtle gradations of light and shadow. Here, the warm tonal qualities of the albumen print lend depth to the weathered sandstone, allowing inscriptions, masonry joints and sculptural forms to remain legible while retaining the atmospheric character for which Beato's Egyptian photographs are distinguished.

Signed directly within the negative, *A. Beato* belongs to the extensive photographic corpus produced by Antonio Beato, one of the most prolific photographers working in Egypt during the nineteenth century. Unlike his brother Felice Beato, whose career took him across Asia and the Middle East, Antonio established himself in Egypt and devoted much of his professional life to photographing its monuments and landscapes. His work therefore occupies an important position between commercial travel photography, archaeological documentation and the developing visual culture of Egyptology.

In this photograph, the historical depth of Karnak becomes inseparable from Beato's own historical moment. The Temple of Khonsu survives as a monument assembled over centuries, while the photograph fixes one particular stage in its modern visibility. Through Beato's lens, the Ptolemaic gateway, the processional avenue and the ancient sanctuary are preserved not simply as ruins, but as an integrated architectural experience, one that would become increasingly mediated by excavation, conservation and modern tourism in the decades that followed.

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