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Antonio Beato,
Karnac – Pylon de Ptolomé / Karnak – Pylon of Ptolemy, ca.
1885

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ANTONIO BEATO

(ca. 1825 – 1906)

KARNAC – PYLON DE PTOLOMÉ / KARNAK – PYLON OF PTOLEMY, CA. 1885

Signed in negative: 'A. Beato.';

Titled in pencil on mount immediately below print and numbered: '491'

Albumen print mounted on card

36 x 25 cm; (14 x 10 in.)

Provenance

Private Collection, England.

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Antonio Beato's *Karnac – Pylon de Ptolomé* belongs to the important corpus of nineteenth-century photographs through which the monumental landscape of ancient Thebes was systematically recorded and disseminated to an international audience. Dating to approximately 1885, the photograph presents a monumental sandstone gateway within the precinct of Amun-Ra at Karnak, while its companion image on the reverse records the great processional landscape of the Avenue of Sphinxes and the First Pylon. Together, the two views evoke the extraordinary architectural and ritual complexity of Karnak and its relationship with the wider sacred landscape of Thebes.

The pylon depicted in the principal image was erected under Ptolemy III Euergetes, who ruled Egypt from 246 to 221 B.C. Its monumental scale and architectural vocabulary demonstrate the remarkable continuity of Egyptian temple architecture during the Ptolemaic period. Although Egypt was then ruled by a Macedonian-Greek dynasty, the Ptolemies consciously adopted the forms and religious conventions of Pharaonic kingship. The construction of monumental gateways, courts and sanctuaries in traditional Egyptian forms enabled the Ptolemaic rulers to inscribe themselves within the long-established sacred and architectural history of Egypt.

At Karnak, architecture was inseparable from movement and ceremony. The vast Precinct of Amun-Ra developed over centuries into one of the most extensive religious complexes of the ancient world, with pylons functioning as monumental thresholds between successive sacred spaces. Beato's photograph concentrates upon this architectural role: the great sandstone portal is presented as an imposing plane of masonry, its massive proportions emphasised by the vertical format of the image. The weathered stone surfaces and surviving architectural details are rendered with considerable clarity, allowing the photograph to operate simultaneously as an aesthetic composition and archaeological document.

Particularly significant is the accompanying image on the reverse, which presents the Avenue of Sphinxes and the First Pylon of Karnak. The avenue formed part of the ceremonial connection between Karnak and Luxor, linking two of the principal temples of ancient Thebes. Lined with sphinxes and used as a processional route during major religious festivals, this monumental axis transformed the urban landscape into a ritual topography. During the Opet Festival, the sacred procession between the temples established a physical manifestation of the relationship between the divine and royal institutions of Thebes. Beato's decision to preserve such a view alongside the Pylon of Ptolemy creates an unusually effective pairing of architectural monument and ceremonial landscape.

The First Pylon itself was constructed under Nectanebo I, who ruled from 380 to 362 B.C., during the Thirtieth Dynasty. Although never fully completed, it remains the principal western entrance to the Karnak complex. Its unfinished state provides an important counterpoint to the Ptolemaic gateway in Beato's principal image, together illustrating the accumulated chronology of Karnak, where successive rulers continually expanded and transformed an already ancient sanctuary.

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The technical qualities of the albumen print contribute substantially to the photograph's archaeological authority. The process allowed Beato to reproduce the texture and monumental surfaces of the sandstone with considerable precision, while its characteristic warm tonal range gives the ancient architecture an atmospheric presence. Mounted on card and titled in French beneath the image, the photograph was clearly intended for circulation within the established European market for Egyptian views. Its inventory number, '491', further indicates its place within a systematic series.

Beato's signature, *A. Beato*, appears directly within the negative, affirming the photograph's place within the extensive corpus produced by the photographer during his long career in Egypt. Unlike his brother Felice, whose photographic career took him across Asia and the Middle East, Antonio remained principally in Egypt, establishing himself at Luxor and devoting much of his professional practice to the documentation of its archaeological monuments.

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COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com