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Anonymous Photographer,
*Médinah Abou – Porte de Ptolomé / Madinat Habu –
Ptolemy's Date, ca. 1885*

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ANONYMOUS PHOTOGRAPHER

(ca. 1885)

*MÉDINAH ABOU – PORTE DE PTOLOMÉ / MADINAT HABU – PTOLEMY'S GATE,
CA. 1885*

Titled in pencil on mount immediately below print and numbered: '483', with a further image on the reverse

Albumen print mounted on card

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

Provenance

Private Collection, England.

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The present photograph records the Ptolemaic gateway of the Small Temple at Medinet Habu, within the monumental landscape of ancient Thebes. Dating to approximately 1885, the image belongs to the formative period of archaeological photography in Egypt, when the camera became an increasingly important instrument for documenting the country's ancient monuments. The photograph is particularly valuable for its presentation of the gateway within its architectural context, capturing the layered history of Medinet Habu, where structures belonging to successive periods of Egyptian history were incorporated into a single sacred landscape.

Medinet Habu is dominated by the great mortuary temple of Ramesses III, constructed during the Twentieth Dynasty on the western bank of the Nile. Immediately to its north stands the smaller temple complex, whose origins extend into the Eighteenth Dynasty. The sanctuary was restored and substantially developed under Hatshepsut and subsequently under Thutmose III, reflecting the continuing importance of the site within the religious landscape of western Thebes. Later rulers continued to modify the complex, resulting in an architectural palimpsest in which New Kingdom and Ptolemaic interventions remain visibly intertwined.

It is within this setting that the gateway represented in the photograph assumes its particular significance. The Ptolemaic additions to the Small Temple include the imposing pylon seen here, accompanied by elaborately decorated columns standing to either side. The gateway provided a monumental threshold into the sacred precinct, its architectural mass and richly articulated surfaces expressing the continuing vitality of Egyptian temple building during the Hellenistic period. Rather than representing a break with Pharaonic tradition, Ptolemaic architecture frequently adopted and perpetuated established Egyptian forms, allowing foreign rulers to present themselves within the established visual and religious language of Egyptian kingship.

The anonymous photographer has composed the view so that the Ptolemaic gateway becomes the principal focus of the image. The vertical format accentuates the upward movement of the architectural elements, while the columns establish a rhythmic framework around the entrance. The weathered surfaces of the stone are rendered with considerable descriptive clarity, revealing the contrast between the monumental geometry of the pylon and the more intricate sculptural articulation of the surrounding architecture. The result is both an archaeological record and a carefully ordered architectural image.

The photograph is also significant in documenting Medinet Habu at a particular moment in the modern history of its rediscovery. By the later nineteenth century, western Thebes had become a major destination for European travellers, scholars and photographers, whose images helped establish the monuments of Luxor and the surrounding necropolis within the emerging visual culture of Egyptology. Photographs such as the present example transformed architectural remains into portable objects of knowledge, allowing distant audiences to study monuments that few could experience directly.

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The albumen process was ideally suited to this purpose. Capable of recording exceptionally fine detail, albumen printing allowed the photographer to reproduce the textures of ancient sandstone, architectural profiles and surviving decorative elements with considerable precision. The warm tonal range characteristic of the medium also introduces an atmospheric quality to the archaeological subject. Mounted on card and accompanied by a French title and the inventory number '483', the photograph was clearly intended for systematic circulation, forming part of a larger series of views of Egyptian monuments. The additional image on the reverse further suggests its relationship to an organised photographic collection or album.

The French terminology of the title, *Médinah Abou – Porte de Ptolomé*, reflects the conventions of the nineteenth-century European photographic market, in which Egyptian monuments were frequently catalogued according to French archaeological and travel nomenclature. Such titles assisted in identifying and disseminating individual views while situating them within a broader European intellectual fascination with ancient Egypt.

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