

# Karnak and the Seven Gates of Osiris

David Lewiston Sharpe explores one of Karnak's hidden gems: the chapel to Osiris Heka-Djet.



ABOVE: God's Wife of Amun Shepenwepet I, daughter of Osorkon III, being suckled in a scene from the Osiris Heka Djet Chapel at Karnak. Photo: RBP

**B**yond the magisterial splendour of the Late Period pylons at the Amun temple's western entrance lie many of Karnak's more secret areas.

The famous hypostyle hall is certainly impressive, with its colossal columns and the prominent warning fingers of its two standing obelisks, but there are also the myriad inscriptions that cover the walls, the reconstructed architectural gems of the Open Air Museum, and a number of peripheral chapels and temples – all of which supplement the three main structures of the complex, to Amun, Mut and Khonsu.

The whole expansive enclosure, covering an area exceeding 200 acres, evolved over a period of some 2,000 years – with its first main phase of construction around 1950 BC during the reign of Senusret I (*although the temple itself was established earlier in the Middle Kingdom, Ed*). Some late additions were made during the Roman Period, around the fourth century AD with work to the avenue of ram-headed sphinxes at the main entrance.

To the east of the sanctuary in the furthest reaches of Karnak's long processional profile, on the far side of an open court, is a small chapel nestling at the foot of the boundary wall of the Amun temple. It is dedicated to Osiris, ruler of the netherworld, given here the suffix *heka djet* – 'Ruler of Eternity' (*see opposite, top*).

The building dates from the Third Intermediate and Late Periods, and its decoration is variously ascribed to the reigns of Osorkon III or IV, Takelot II (Twenty-second and Twenty-third Dynasties) and Shabaqo (Twenty-fifth Dynasty) – depictions of these pharaohs alongside their cartouches are found inside this temple as are images of the daughters who became the God's Wife of Amun, including Shepenwepet I, daughter of Osorkon III (*shown above*).

In the Egyptian world-view, time had two aspects: *djet*, or 'changelessness', and *neheh*, or 'continuousness'. The 'changelessness' of Osiris in the afterlife, expressed by the suffix *heka djet*, seems partly the focus of this chapel's art-

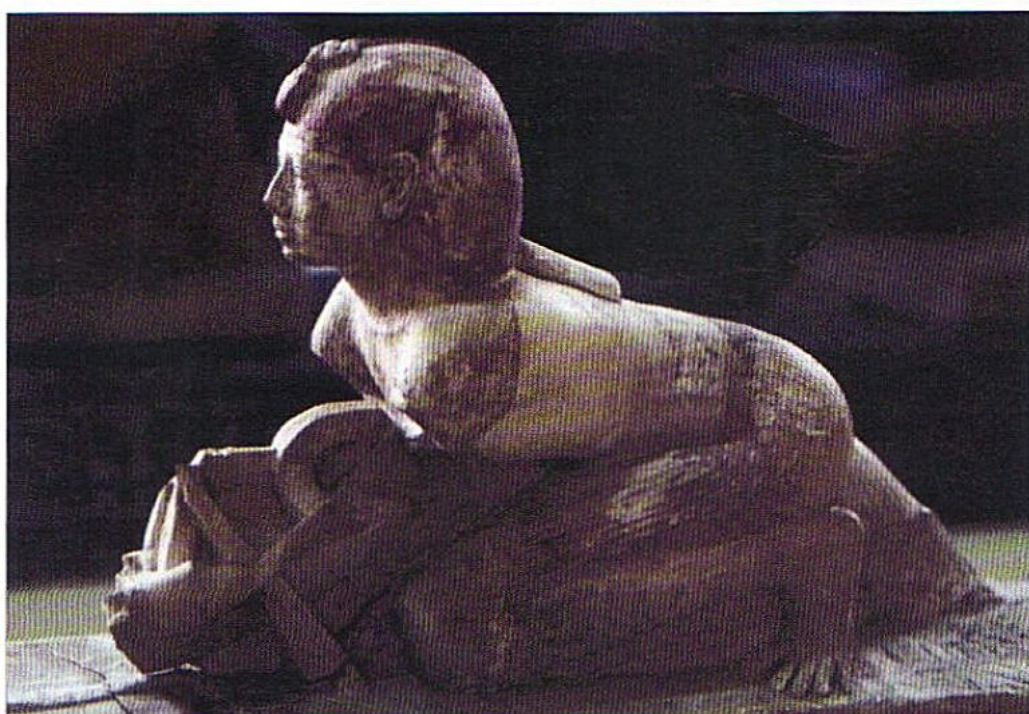




work. There were often two qualities ascribed to many natural and supernatural phenomena in the ancient Egyptian belief system. The creation myth of Hermopolis was based on an ogdoad, a series of eight deities forming four pairs, each with a male and a female manifestation: Amun and Amaunet, Kek and Kauket, Heh and Hauhet, Nun and Naunet. They represented a duality inherent in each of four elements of the ancient Egyptian universe: hiddenness, darkness, eternity, and the primeval waters. By imbuing time with two key qualities, a potential for imbalance is revealed. *Ma'at* (order) and *Isfet* (chaos) express this with great clarity in the well-known image of the heart measured against the feather in

the Judgement Hall vignette from the *Book of the Dead*. Osiris, in this temple, is stripped of any destabilising duality and the assertion of his changelessness becomes the sole focus of ritual observance.

The little edifice to Osiris Heka-Djet, where time and death are subtly addressed, has just three small rooms. Overshadowed by the immensity of the Amun temple, this chapel seems a very private environment, almost as though it was built for quiet individual contemplative obeisance. On the south-east wall of the first room inside the building there is a false door – a meeting point for the living and the dead – balanced by an entrance that leads to the second of the three spaces within.



**TOP**  
The exterior of the Osiris Heka Djet chapel at Karnak.  
Photo: © Su Bayfield with permission

**BOTTOM**  
A statuette of a prostrate Osorkon III offering the barque of Sokari (or Sokar, the god of the dead who was usually identified with Ptah and Osiris). In the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.  
Photo: RBP



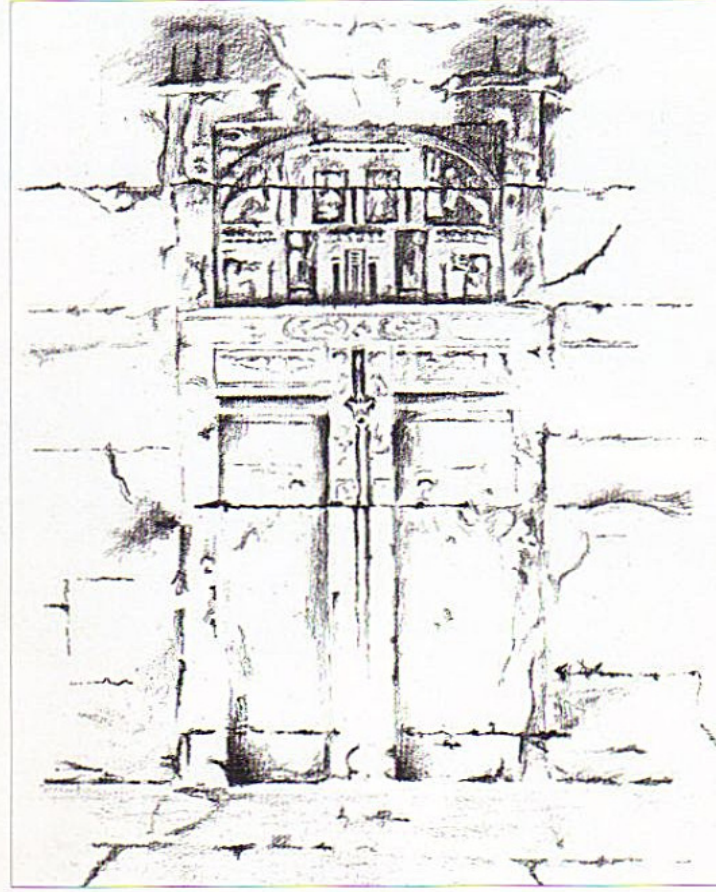


## The Gates of Osiris

False doors are familiar features in funerary and temple architecture – a door not built to function as such in this world, but rather to permit the passage of the deceased or the divine. While false doors are most often covered with offering formulae, this particular example is bereft of inscriptions; it instead comprises the lintels and door jambs of seven separate doors, one inside another. The *Book of the Dead* includes a spell which describes the seven gates of the house of Osiris.

This spell (Chapter 144) names the heralds, wardens and occupants of each of the seven gates through which the deceased must pass to reach Osiris. It then lists offerings of bread, beer, meat, scent vases, milk and incense, items familiar from the standard texts of the offering formula, known as the *htp di nsw*: “A boon which the king and Osiris give [...], bread, beer, oxen and fowl [...]”. Here the gifts recounted are for the guardians who the deceased may have to placate as they approach the key event in their progress towards deliverance, the weighing of the heart.

In some contexts, the centre of the false door carries an effigy of the deceased, before which the offerings would be brought. Though it is a functional feature of tomb architecture, the false door is also found in temple sanctuaries which are at a fundamental level the resting place of the god – as well as their ‘home’. The temple of Osiris Heka Djed was in part a representation of the tomb of Osiris, and offerings would have taken place before this seven-fold false door. Given the convoluted sequence of names and epithets of the guardians of the gates in spell 144, this deceptively plain door could well have been an altar for rather elaborate ‘funerary’ rites.



## Pilgrimage and Remembrance

On the wall of the innermost chamber is a depiction of the pharaoh as Horus – the son of Osiris, and the divine personality associated with a living king at their accession. The Osiris myth relates how after Osiris has been killed by his brother Set (the outcast god of chaos and the desert), his son Horus is born by virtue of the powers of Isis, his mother and the sister-wife of Osiris. The king's deceased predecessor becomes ‘the Osiris N’, and bears the god's name as a title in the *Book of the Dead*, and in funerary contexts more broadly, as a marker of his elevated status. The focus of the chapel of Osiris Heka Djed, if nothing else, demonstrates how the wish for continued life – eternal life, *ankh djed* – was a most noble wish inherent in ancient Egyptian religion.

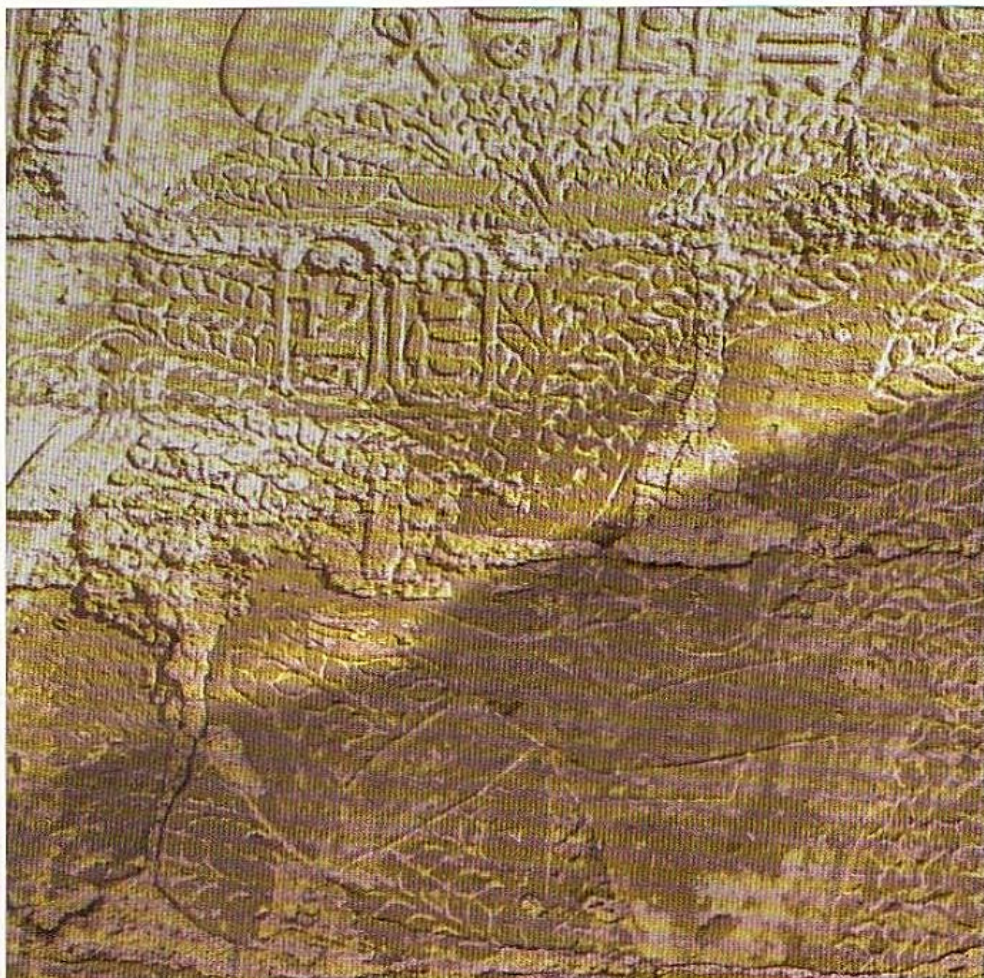
The Twenty-third Dynasty pharaoh Osorkon III is shown crouching by the *ished*-tree often associated with the goddess Seshat, wife of Thoth, the god of writing. Marking out the life of the pharaoh with the fronds of the sacred tree of Heliopolis, Thoth and Seshat count the years on the leaves of the tree. This seems as much a petition to Osiris as an appeal either to time itself, as *neheh* or ‘continuousness’ – days, years and sunrises, seasons – or *djet*, ‘changelessness’ and agelessness. The king is depicted back-to-back with his son Takelot III, who reigned as co-regent with his father. The crown of the tree above the head of the king, where the vertical stem rises above his right shoulder, shows seven branches, bearing an abundance of leaves – signifying an abundance of years. The seven branches on the tree mirror the numerology of the false-door in the preceding room. Seven was a potent number expressing completion – in some ways (if not mathematically) a ‘perfect’ number.



There are other telling details in the inscriptions in this temple which reflect the Osiris religion. Next to the depiction of the seven false doors, the inscriptions carry a reference to Abydos, site of the Osireion and the temple of Sety I, and a site of national pilgrimage in ancient times. While some gods' cults patronised by the state acquired the attention of the elite, Osiris had become a 'public' god: through him, all might hope for a hereafter, not just the powerful.

In the temple of Sety I at Abydos there is a sanctuary with seven chapels, each dedicated to different deity, the Pharaoh included: Sety I, Ptah, Ra-Horakhty, Amun, Osiris, Isis and Horus. In Egyptian thought, the number seven carried various meanings, and so these architectural features which embody the 'magic' number begin to make sense. In the battle with Set, Osiris' butchered cadaver is divided into 14 parts – twice 7 – which are dispersed across the Upper and Lower kingdoms.

As a satellite chapel associated with the prevalent Osiris religion, the Heka Djed temple represents an odd inclusion in the precinct of Amun. The kings of the Twenty-second and Twenty-third Dynasties came from the eastern Delta, in the north. A political rift between the region of Thebes in the south and the rulers whose gave their allegiance to the north resulted in the country as a whole becoming riven with fractious divisions. The pharaohs of these concurrent



dynasties dedicated temples, and were themselves buried, in the north; a small Osiris temple in the shadow of the house of Amun appears a meagre gesture, if in part to heal political wounds, or reassert power.

However, the priestly office of God's Wife of Amun at Thebes gained in importance at this time. To maintain authority and stabilise the kingship, she was empowered to validate the succession – in a carefully stage-managed fashion, no doubt, to endorse a pre-ordained outcome. Perhaps this was a kind of lip-service to the erstwhile importance of Thebes. Amid the grandness of its surroundings, such a strange and quiet dedication to Osiris, the god who was integral to the rites of death, is therefore beguiling and thought-provoking. Who, one wonders, were the priesthood that officiated at this chapel, and what were their political intentions?

## David Lewiston Sharpe

David studied ancient Egyptian language at City University for two years, and holds a Certificate in Continuing Education. He has published on ancient Egyptian language, and history more generally, in addition to his work as a musician and composer.

### OPPOSITE PAGE

#### LEFT

The distinctive false door of the Osiris Heka Djed chapel showing seven gates, one inside the other, through which the deceased must pass to reach Osiris and the afterlife.

Photo: © Olaf Tausch

#### RIGHT

A drawing of one of the false doors at the Temple of Sety I, at Abydos. This temple is mentioned in an inscription next to the Osiris chapel's false door.

Image: © David Lewiston Sharpe.

### THIS PAGE

#### ABOVE

The *Ished*-tree inside the Osiris Heka Djed chapel, with the cartouches of Takelot III on the left and Osorkon III on the right.

Photo: © Su Bayfield

#### LEFT

A Late Period statue of Osiris from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Photo: RBP

