

Sensing the Divine Beyond the Walls: Smell, Memory, and Restricted Access at Karnak

Introduction



Fig.1 Karnak complex

The Karnak Temple Complex, one of the most extensive and continuously developed religious sites in ancient Egypt, has traditionally been interpreted through the lens of architectural monumentality and spatial division. Its massive enclosure walls, axial processional routes, and increasingly restricted inner sanctuaries appear to reflect a religious system structured around exclusion, in which access to the divine was tightly controlled by the priesthood and the king. Within this framework, the inner temple, particularly the sanctuary containing the cult statue, has often been understood as physically and symbolically inaccessible to the majority of the population.

This interpretation has led to a dominant scholarly assumption: that ordinary people were largely excluded from direct engagement with the gods in their everyday life, and that religious experience was concentrated within controlled ritual spaces. However, this view relies heavily on a visual and spatial model of religious access, equating participation with physical proximity and sight. It risks overlooking the possibility that religious experience in ancient Egypt operated through alternative sensory and embodied modes.

This thesis argues that even if common people did not regularly enter the inner precincts of the Karnak Temple complex, they were not excluded from experiencing the divine. Instead, they engaged with it through sensory mediation, particularly through smell. Drawing on sensory archaeology (Hamilakis 2013; Day, Skates 2020), phenomenology, and cognitive research on

olfaction, this study proposes that smell functioned as a key medium through which divine presence was perceived, remembered, and integrated into everyday life.

The divine at Karnak was continuously extended into the surrounding environment through ritual practice, material circulation, and embodied experience. In this sense enclosure walls reorganized the sensory conditions under which religious experience occurred.

The Architectural phases of Karnak

The development of the Karnak Temple Complex spans more than 1,500 years, beginning in the Middle Kingdom and continuing through successive phases of expansion, destruction, and reconstruction. This long architectural history produced a highly stratified and densely layered sacred landscape composed of multiple temples, pylons, courtyards, processional routes, and secondary structures associated with different deities, cults, and royal patrons (Sullivan, 2008, 2010; Ambrosio, 2025). In Karnak each ruler inscribed new architectural interventions onto an already existing ritual environment, resulting in a complex spatial palimpsest.

The site is commonly divided into four major sectors: South Karnak, associated with the goddess Mut; East Karnak, where a temple dedicated to the Aten was located; North Karnak, devoted to the god Montu; and Central Karnak, dominated by the great temple of Amun (Sullivan, 2010, 2008). Each of these precincts developed distinct ritual and architectural identities, yet they remained interconnected within a broader sacred landscape structured by movement, visibility, and controlled access. The earliest evidence for the Amun temple dates to the First Intermediate Period, when Intef II is thought to have constructed a modest mud-brick structure on the east bank of the Nile (Sullivan, 2010, 2008; Ambrosio, 2025). Although relatively small in scale, this early foundation established the religious and geographical core around which later monumental expansions would accumulate.

Over time, particularly during the New Kingdom, the site underwent extensive enlargement. Successive rulers added monumental pylons, vast colonnaded courtyards, and multiple enclosure walls, gradually transforming the temple into a highly ordered and hierarchical spatial system. (Sullivan, 2010 2008; Ambrosio, 2025). These architectural additions increased the size of the complex and reorganised how space was experienced and traversed. Movement through Karnak became progressively structured, guiding individuals through a sequence of transitional zones that alternated between openness and restriction. Each architectural element intensified the separation between exterior urban space and the inner ritual core of the temple. (Ahanonu, 2013)

At the centre of this increasingly controlled spatial arrangement lay the sanctuary, the most sacred and inaccessible area of the complex, housing the cult statue of Amun. Access to this area was limited to the highest ranks of the priesthood and the king, reinforcing its role as the focal point of divine presence. (Spencer, 2010)

This architectural organization has often been interpreted as a material expression of religious social division. The deeper one moved into the temple, the fewer individuals were permitted to enter, culminating in a space accessible only to the king and high priests. (Ahanonu, 2013) Such a structure appears to physically embody the separation between divine and human realms.

However, this interpretation is grounded in a primarily visual paradigm of religious experience, assuming that access to the divine is equivalent to visual contact with cult images or physical

entry into sacred space. This model neglects the possibility that religious experience may be constituted through other sensory channels that operate beyond visual control.

Reconsidering Access: Archaeological Debates

The question of temple accessibility has been central to Egyptological debate, particularly in relation to large state temple complexes such as Karnak. Earlier scholarship tended to assume that Egyptian temples were strictly closed to non-elite individuals, functioning as highly restricted ritual spaces reserved for the king and priesthood. (Salvador, 2025) From this perspective, physical access to the divine was tightly controlled, and religious experience for the wider population was understood as indirect or symbolic. However, from the mid-twentieth century onward, this model has been increasingly challenged through archaeological, textual, and iconographic evidence suggesting more complex patterns of interaction between temples and non-elite groups. (Salvador, 2025)

One of the earliest contributions to this debate was made by Charles Nims, who proposed that common people may have accessed certain areas of the Karnak Temple Complex, particularly the hypostyle hall. His argument was based on graffiti depicting symbolic motifs interpreted as “adoration by all the commoners” (Salvador 2025). This interpretation suggested that non-elite individuals could have physically entered at least parts of the temple, engaging directly with sacred space rather than remaining entirely outside it. While influential, this reading remains contested, particularly regarding whether such evidence reflects actual access or ideological representation. (Salvador, 2025)

Additional evidence comes from textual references to the *rekhyt*, often translated as “the laity” or “common people.” Inscriptions from the reign of Ramesses II mention the *rekhyt* in connection with temple spaces and royal festivals (Salvador 2025). However, as Salvador (2025) argues, these references are ambiguous. Rather than confirming physical presence within restricted areas, they may express ideological claims about universal veneration of the king, projecting collective devotion without implying spatial inclusion.

A similar ambiguity surrounds architectural features such as contra-temples. These structures, typically attached to outer enclosure walls and oriented outward, have been interpreted as possible spaces of contact between the temple and the wider population. In theory, they may have enabled limited interaction with divine representations through statues or architectural openings accessible from outside the main precinct. However, there is no conclusive archaeological evidence that they functioned as regularly accessible public spaces, and their precise role remains uncertain. (Salvador, 2025, 2022, 2016; Gallet, 2013)



Fig. 2 Temple of the hearing ear.

Further complexity is added by inscriptions and material objects associated with devotional practices. A statue of Bakhenkhonsu, likely from the eastern sector of Karnak, contains two

“appeals to the living” addressed to “all people who discern in their heart, those who exist and are on earth” (Salvador 2025). This phrasing suggests an audience broader than the priesthood. However, despite this inclusive language, there is no direct archaeological evidence confirming regular public access to temple interiors. Notably, Karnak lacks material typically associated with open cult participation, such as ear stelae or ostraca with personal prayers. (Salvador, 2025)



Fig. 3 Block statue of the High Priest of Amun Bakenkhonsu.

A further line of evidence comes from four scribe statues discovered in the court of the tenth pylon, positioned facing the entranceway. Two depict Amenhotep son of Hapu, a prominent official under Amenhotep III, and two represent the general and vizier Paramesses (Salvador 2025). All are carved in black granite and show significant wear on the unrolled papyrus in their laps, likely resulting from repeated contact over long periods. Their inscriptions address “the people of Karnak” and travellers from afar, suggesting they may have been intended for a broad audience, potentially including non-elite visitors.

However, this interpretation is not definitive. The wear could equally result from ritual or habitual contact by priests and scribes within the temple environment. Interaction with elite statues was common in internal cultic contexts, and repeated touching may reflect the contact that the priests had with the statues rather than the public (Salvador, 2025)

Graffiti evidence adds another dimension. In the court of the seventh pylon, a key point along the processional route, Salvador (2016) records 113 graffiti on the west wall, including bird motifs, symbols, and short inscriptions left by scribes. Their placement along the processional axis suggests deliberate engagement with both the passing divine statue and temple personnel. As Salvador (2022) argues, graffiti can be understood as a more accessible counterpart to formal “appeals to the living,” representing a durable form of presence within sacred space.

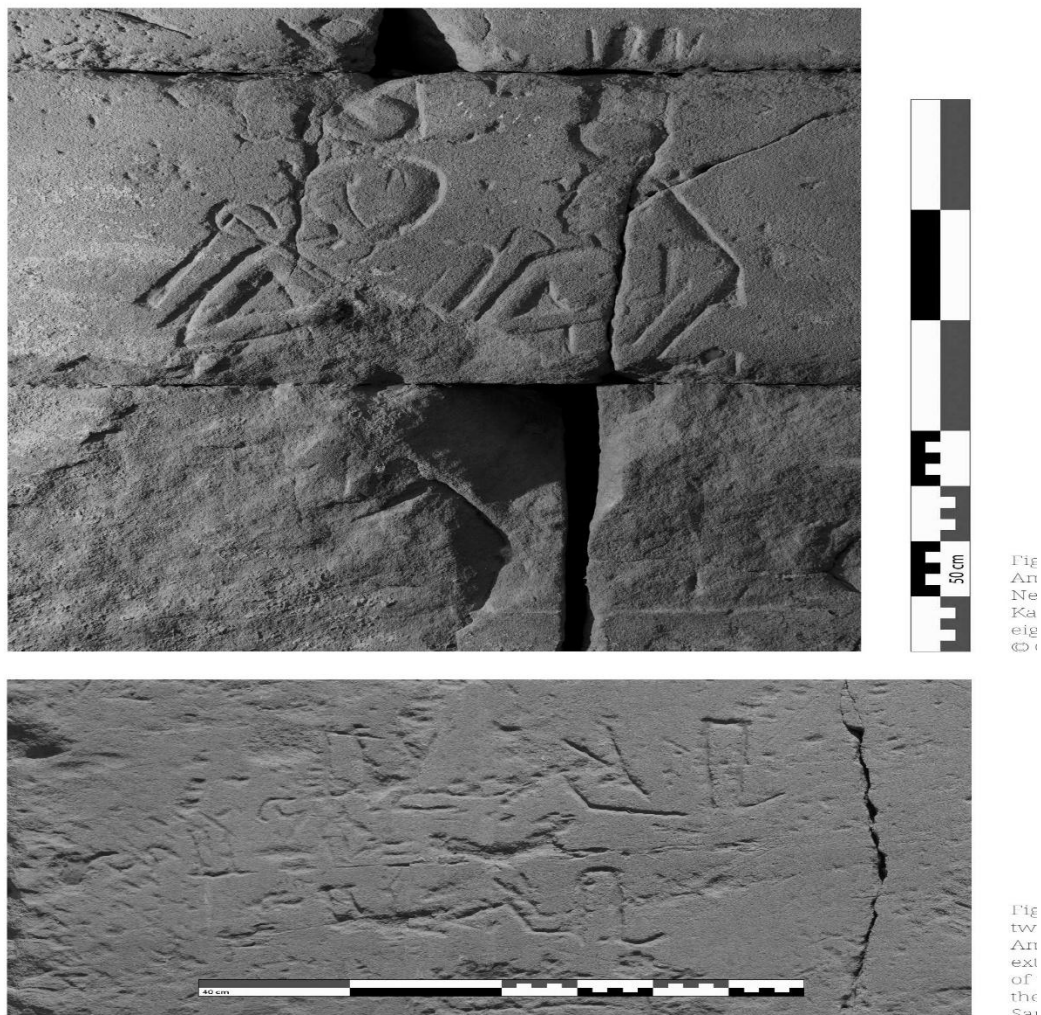


Fig. 4 Graffito of Amenhotep I with Ahmose- Nefertari. Amun temple at Karnak, west gate of the eight pylon, east thickness and scribe Sety inscribed twice on the same block. Amun temple at Karnak, exterior east wall of the court of the tenth pylon, south of the door.

These inscriptions also reflect social patterns. Clusters of graffiti indicate that individuals with shared names, titles, or occupations often inscribed in close proximity (Salvador 2022). This suggests that group identity may have shaped how presence within the sacred landscape was expressed and perceived. Graffiti thus functioned both as communication with the divine and as social inscription within the temple environment.

Importantly, priests and scribes who produced much of this material were not socially isolated from wider society. Priesthood in ancient Egypt was often a part-time role, and many priests spent long periods outside the temple engaged in agricultural and domestic life. (Spencer, 2010). They therefore operated as intermediaries between sacred and profane spheres.

Through this mobility, elements of temple practice extended beyond architectural boundaries. Perfumed oils and unguents used in ritual, absorbed into skin and clothing, may have carried sensory traces of sacred space into everyday contexts. In this way, the presence of the divine could be subtly evoked beyond the temple interior.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that temple accessibility cannot be reduced to a binary distinction between inclusion and exclusion. While sustained physical access by non-elite individuals to inner temple spaces remains unlikely, there is strong evidence for multiple forms of interaction, including textual address, material contact, and sensory transmission. Focusing solely on physical access therefore risks obscuring a more fundamental issue: how religious experience was structured and sustained without direct visual engagement with the divine.

Priests as Mediators of Sacred Experience

To address this issue, it is necessary to reconsider the role of priests not as isolated ritual specialists but as socially embedded actors. As said before, priesthood was often a part-time occupation. Many priests maintained households, participated in agricultural production, and engaged in everyday social life outside the temple (Spencer 2010).

Within the temple, however, priests performed highly structured rituals that placed them in direct contact with the divine. These included daily offerings, purification rites, and the care of the cult statue. Central to these practices was the use of incense and perfumed oils, which played both practical and symbolic roles in mediating divine presence. (Spencer, 2010; Manniche, 2009)

The burning of incense, in particular, produced a dense sensory atmosphere within ritual spaces. Smoke, fragrance, and residue formed part of the material environment of worship. Importantly, these sensory effects were not confined to the interior of the sanctuary.

Priests and temple workers moved regularly between sacred and non-sacred spaces. As they did so, they carried with them the sensory traces of ritual practice. The smell of incense and perfumed substances would have lingered on their bodies, clothing, and tools. In this way, priests functioned as mobile carriers of sacred sensory material, extending the presence of the temple beyond its architectural boundaries.

This movement created a form of sensory continuity between temple and society. The divine was not confined to the inner sanctuary but circulated through embodied experience.

Smell and Divine Presence

The sensory afterlife of ritual practice becomes especially significant when examined through the cultural and cognitive importance of smell. Olfaction is not simply one sensory modality among others; it operates through direct neural pathways linking the olfactory system to the amygdala and hippocampus, regions associated with emotion and memory formation. (Shrode, 2012) As Shrode (2012) demonstrates, smell is uniquely capable of evoking vivid autobiographical memories, often more emotionally charged and temporally distant than those triggered by visual or auditory stimuli. This neurological structure provides a powerful framework for understanding how sensory experience may have shaped religious perception in ancient Egypt. (Shrode, 2012)

In Egyptian religious thought, smell was not merely an attribute of sacred space but a material expression of divine presence. (Incordino, 2016; Wise, 2009) Fragrance was understood as a substance through which gods manifested themselves in the world. Incense and perfumes were not symbolic substitutes for the divine; they were considered extensions of divine embodiment itself (Wise 2009). The association between fragrance and divinity is reflected in mythological traditions in which aromatic substances are linked to divine bodies. The Eye of Horus, for instance, could be identified with resinous substances, imagined as bodily emanations of the god. (Wise, 2009)

Similarly, fragrance played a role in signifying divine arrival and communication. Distinctive scents were associated with sacred lands such as Punt and were interpreted as markers of divine presence (Incordino, 2016). In the narrative of Hatshepsut's divine birth, the queen's mother perceives Amun-Ra through fragrance before visual contact, indicating that smell functioned as an immediate and authoritative sensory indicator of divinity. In this context, olfaction operated as a primary channel of divine recognition. (Incordino, 2016)

The ritual use of incense at Karnak can therefore be understood as a mechanism for producing and circulating divine presence. The repeated burning of aromatic substances such as frankincense, myrrh, and locally sourced resins created a persistent olfactory environment that was closely associated with ritual activity (Manniche, 2009). These scents, carried by air currents, human movement, and material residues, were not fully contained within temple architecture.

From this perspective, smell functioned as a permeable medium of sacred communication, capable of extending religious experience beyond spatial boundaries. Even individuals without visual access to the temple interior could encounter sensory traces of ritual activity in their everyday environment. The divine, therefore, was not confined to sight but diffused through the sensory landscape.

Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Sensory archaeology

The theoretical basis for a multisensory reading of Karnak is reinforced by phenomenological approaches that emphasise lived, bodily experience. In the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology challenges the idea that humans primarily understand the world through abstract mental representations. Instead, it argues that meaning arises through embodied

engagement with a world that has social and material significance. (Merleau-Ponty, 2005; Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, Dowling, 2016)

From this standpoint, experience cannot be reduced to simply “observing” the world from an external position. Rather, it is grounded in *being-in-the-world*, where perception is always situated within specific bodily, spatial, and temporal conditions. Merleau-Ponty (2005), in particular, stresses that the body is not an object among others, but the medium through which reality is experienced and becomes intelligible. Perception is an active process shaped by movement, embodied habits, and accumulated sensory memory.

Applied to archaeology, this challenge approaches that privilege static visual analysis of monuments. Instead of treating architecture as a fixed symbolic system to be read from above, phenomenology encourages an understanding of space as something actively experienced through bodily movement and sensory exposure. In this sense, built environments are not merely seen but lived through, producing meaning through repeated sensory encounters rather than just visual experiences.

Hamilakis (2013) builds on this tradition by arguing that sensoriality is inseparable from memory and social practice. Sensory perception is never encountered in a pure or immediate form; rather, it is always filtered through prior embodied experiences, cultural learning, and mnemonic association. What is perceived in the present is therefore never isolated but always carries traces of previous encounters with similar stimuli and perception is shaped by accumulated sensory biographies.

Within this framework, smell becomes particularly significant because of its direct connection to emotional memory. Unlike vision, which can be selectively directed or blocked, olfactory experience is immersive and unavoidable. It penetrates bodily boundaries and is processed through neural pathways closely linked to emotional and autobiographical memory formation. (Shrode, 2012)

Day and Skates (2020) similarly stress the importance of sensory plurality in archaeological interpretation, arguing that privileging vision alone reproduces a modern Western bias that misrepresents past lived realities. A sensorial archaeology must therefore attend to the full sensory field through which environments were experienced, including sound, touch, movement, and smell. Importantly, this is a conceptual shift in how meaning itself is understood: meaning is not read from objects but emerges through the embodied engagement with the object and the space.

Taken together, phenomenology and sensory archaeology suggest that ancient Egyptian religious experience cannot be reduced to visual access to cult statues or architectural interiors. Instead, it must be understood as a process of continuous bodily entanglement with materially and sensorially charged environments. In the context of Karnak, this means that even individuals outside the temple walls were not excluded from religious experience but were continuously stimulated within the sensory field of ritual activities, particularly through olfactory diffusion.

Smell, in this sense, operates not as a secondary or residual form of religious communication, but as a primary mode through which the presence of the divine is both perceived and remembered. It is precisely because sensory experience is always already mediated by memory and embodiment that the smell of incense could function as a persistent reminder of divine presence, even in the absence of visual access to the temple interior.

Enclosure Walls and Sensory Permeability



Fig. 5 Karnak temple with reconstructed enclosure walls.

The architectural prominence of enclosure walls at Karnak has often been interpreted as evidence of exclusion and control. Siegel (2020) argues that such walls functioned as political structures that materialized boundaries between sacred and profane space. Their monumentality and ubiquity made them powerful visual symbols of authority, clearly delineating restricted zones within the urban landscape. (Siegel, 2020)

However, while enclosure walls regulate movement and visibility, they do not fully control sensory transmission. Smell, in particular, is not constrained by architectural boundaries in the same way as sight or physical access. Incense produced within temple precincts, along with other aromatic substances used in ritual activities, would have circulated beyond the enclosed space.

Kemp (2004) further notes that enclosure walls did not simply respond to functional needs but also played a symbolic role in constructing sacred space. Their scale, design, and layered structure intensified the perception of separation. Yet this very separation may have contributed to the amplification of sensory awareness. The more restricted a space became, the more significant its sensory traces outside it may have been perceived.

From this perspective, enclosure walls do not simply restrict access but actively structure sensory experience of absence and presence. By limiting visual access while allowing sensory leakage, they create a condition in which the divine is simultaneously hidden and perceptible. The sacred becomes something that is not seen but sensed.

This dynamic is particularly important when considering everyday life outside the temple. For individuals who could not enter sacred spaces, the walls themselves would have been a constant visual reminder of divine presence. However, this visual boundary was complemented

by sensory continuity: the smell of incense, ritual residues carried by priests, and atmospheric diffusion of fragrance all contributed to a lived experience of proximity without access.

Festivals and Collective Effervescence

Public festivals represent moments in which the normally restricted sensory environment of the temple is temporarily extended into public space. During such events, the cult statue was carried outside the sanctuary, allowing broader parts of the population to engage directly with the divine through sight, sound, movement, and smell. (Teeter, 2011)

These events produced intense sensory and emotional experiences that reinforced collective identity. Inomata (2020) argues that public rituals are designed to generate multisensory engagement, creating shared affective states among participants. The combination of visual spectacle, music, movement, and olfactory stimulation contributes to a heightened sense of unity and meaning.

Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence further clarifies this dynamic. In moments of collective ritual participation, individuals experience a dissolution of ordinary boundaries between self and group, producing emotional intensity and a sense of transcendence (Kronstedt 2025). These experiences are not purely cognitive but deeply embodied, grounded in sensory immersion.

However, such moments were exceptional rather than continuous. The challenge, therefore, is to understand how religious meaning persisted in everyday life outside festival contexts. Here, smell again plays a central role. The sensory memory of festivals, particularly the association between incense and divine presence, would have been reactivated through everyday olfactory encounters.

In this way, smell functions as a bridge between extraordinary ritual moments and ordinary experience. It allows the divine to remain present not as a visible figure but as a recallable sensory presence embedded in memory and environment.

Synthesis: The Divine Beyond Visibility

When considered together, these strands of evidence suggest a fundamentally different model of religious experience at Karnak. Rather than being defined by physical access or visual contact, engagement with the divine operated through a complex sensory network in which smell played a central role.

Priests acted as mediators, carrying sensory traces of ritual practice beyond the temple. Enclosure walls structured but did not fully contain sensory experience, allowing olfactory signals to circulate into surrounding space. Festivals provided moments of intensified multisensory engagement, while everyday life was shaped by residual sensory cues that activated memory and association.

In this system, exclusion from the temple interior does not equate to exclusion from religious experience. Instead, it produces a different mode of engagement, one that is indirect, embodied, and continuous. The divine is not absent outside the temple; it is sensed, remembered, and reactivated through smell.

This interpretation aligns with Hamilakis' (2013) assertion that sensory perception is always shaped by embodied memory and lived experience. It also resonates with Day's and Skate's (2020) call for a multisensory archaeology that accounts for the full range of human perception. Together, these frameworks allow us to move beyond architectural determinism and toward a more nuanced understanding of ancient religious life.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the restricted accessibility of the Karnak Temple Complex does not imply the exclusion of common people from religious experience. Instead, it suggests a reconfiguration of how the divine was perceived and encountered. By foregrounding smell as a key sensory medium, it becomes possible to understand how religious experience extended beyond architectural boundaries into everyday life.

Enclosure walls, while functioning as political and spatial markers of exclusion, also contributed to the sensory production of sacred presence. Priests and temple personnel acted as carriers of ritual scent, extending the reach of the temple into the broader environment. Festivals provided moments of intensified sensory engagement, while everyday exposure to olfactory cues sustained a continuous, embodied awareness of the divine.

Ultimately, the divine at Karnak was not confined to vision or architecture. It was dispersed through sensory experience, embedded in memory, and sustained through the body. Rather than being absent from everyday life, the gods were continuously present, sensed through smell, remembered through experience, and lived through the rhythms of daily existence.

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FIGURES

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