

Taharqa's Shrine

Key facts

- Taharqa's shrine is part of a temple built at Kawa in about BC 680.
- It was built on the orders of Taharqa who was Pharaoh from 690 - 664 BC.
- The shrine was dedicated to the sun and fertility god Amun-Re. It was intended to give help to Taharqa in ruling over his large kingdom.
- It was abandoned in the 3rd Century AD and lay buried in sand until excavations in 1930.
- Taharqa's shrine is the largest intact Egyptian building in this country.



Taharqa's shrine with ram at the entrance



Map of Egypt and Sudan showing Nubian sites

Who was Taharqa?

Taharqa came from the land of Kush, part of ancient Nubia. (modern day Sudan). He ruled over both Egypt and Nubia.

His land was rich in cattle, gold and minerals. It was on the trade route for the rest of Africa and unusual and exotic things such as ivory, ebony, incense, oils, animal skins and ostrich feathers travelled along this road.

Much of Taharqa's land was desert. However, many people lived by the River Nile which flooded every year. The floods brought much needed water to the lands and resulted in fertile mud that was excellent for growing crops.

Why did he build the shrine?

When Taharqa was a young man he passed through Kawa on his way to Thebes. At Kawa he saw an old brick temple covered with sand in a terrible state. He continued his journey, but the temple made a lasting impression on him.

When Taharqa was made pharaoh he vowed to rebuild the temple. He wanted this to be a special building so he used skilled architects and craftsmen from Memphis 1000 miles away. It took four years to build the temple.

Inside the temple, Taharqa built a special building, a shrine dedicated to Amun-Re. He hoped the shrine would provide him with help in ruling over such a large kingdom.



Detail showing Taharqa wearing head dress

What can you see on the shrine?

At the main entrances to the temple were statues of two large rams carved out of granite. The ram, symbol of Amun-Re, was here to give protection to the pharaoh Taharqa. Amun-Re was the sun god and god of fertility and was the most important god to the Nubians. He is often shown as a ram.

On the outer walls of the shrine Taharqa is shown with the great gods in scenes carved in relief and originally painted in bright colours.

On the west wall Taharqa appears wearing the Nubian royal headdress with two cobras and offering gifts to Amun-Re. He is also shown with the gods of Egypt, wearing the Egyptian double crown.

In the centre of the temple was a shrine. A statue of Amun-Re would have been in the shrine. Everyday the priests would look after the god as if he were alive, waking him, clothing him and offering him food.

How did Taharqa's shrine get to The Ashmolean, Oxford?

In the 3rd Century AD the temple was attacked and burnt. It was abandoned and eventually became covered with sand. The beautiful coloured decoration was lost from sight.

The shrine lay undiscovered until 1930 when excavations at Kawa were led by Professor Griffith, Professor of Egyptology at Oxford University. In recognition for his contribution to archaeology in that region the shrine was given to Oxford University.

The shrine measures 4 metres square and was built of 236 blocks of sandstone which had to be individually packed and transported 2500 thousand miles back to Oxford.

It was a difficult job to dismantle the shrine. There were terrible midges everywhere that got into the men's hair, eyes and nostrils. They had to wear visors made of gauze to cover their hair, long sleeved shirts buttoned up and trousers tucked into their socks.

Eventually the blocks were drawn, numbered and a cellulose solution put on them to preserve them to preserve the carved surfaces. They were packed carefully in 200 large wooden crates, wrapped in palm fibres to protect them. The cases were loaded on to a barge and towed 300 kilometres up the Nile to the nearest railway. The train then took the cases to Port Sudan on the Red Sea, where they were transported to England by ship.

The shrine was rebuilt in the Museum on a concrete foundation 2 metres deep as it was so heavy. The shrine is the only intact Egyptian building in this country.

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