



The Daily Ritual

Introduction to the Daily Ritual:

The Daily Ritual was one of a series of cultic rituals performed for the statue of the god by temple priests each day. Performed in the morning after the first light of dawn, it was complemented by similar but more abbreviated rituals in the afternoon and evening. The Egyptians believed that the gods themselves had established the correct form of the rituals, and along with the celebration of annual festivals, these acts were considered imperative for securing the continuing beneficence of the divinities.¹

Motivating the ritual was the desire to satisfy and placate the god through the protection, nourishment, and service of his or her cult statue. The image of the god, enclosed within its naos within the sanctuary, was believed to contain that god's *ka*, or "life force." By providing the god's *ka* with the benefit of numerous offerings, the Egyptians hoped to receive patronage and approval from the god in return.²

In theory, the pharaoh, who held the role of "high priest" of all the gods' cults in Egypt, performed the Daily Ritual to Amun each day at Karnak. In the relief scenes preserved in Karnak's hypostyle hall, king Sety I of the 19th Dynasty is represented as executing the designated cult acts. In reality, the king would not have been present in Thebes for much of the year, as the administrative center of Egypt in the New Kingdom was located in the north at Memphis. Instead, a high-ranking priest of the temple would have carried out the ritual. At Karnak, this would have been the temple's "high priest of Amun,"³ although there is some evidence that priests may have taken turns officiating these important rites.⁴

The performance of the Daily Ritual began in the early morning, with the entrance of the purified priest into the sanctuary. He lit a torch and burned incense, illuminating and cleansing the darkened, most sacred space of the temple. Next, he approached the shrine holding the cult statue of the god Amun. The seal securing the doors was broken, the bolts pulled back, and the door to the shrine opened, revealing the image of the god. The priest then knelt before the god, kissing the ground before Amun. After raising himself, he chanted greetings and praises to the god, while censuring and offering precious spices and oils to the statue. He removed the figure from the shrine, cleaning and purifying the image before ornamenting it in fresh linen, oils and cosmetics. After being purified a second time, the god's statue was returned to the shrine. The priest then invited the god to inhabit his statue, and offered him food and drink for sustenance. Af-



Episode B: Sety I breaks the seal of the Amun-Ra shrine.

- 1 Shafer 1997
- 2 Lorton 1999
- 3 Golvin and Goyon 1987: 41-42
- 4 Lorton 1999

ter chanting additional hymns, the priest closed the doors of the shrine, resealed it, and removed the foodstuffs presented to the god. Finally, the priest swept away his own footprints, extinguished the torch, and exited the sanctuary.⁵

Texts and representations of the performance of the Daily Ritual come from papyri and temple scenes dating to the New Kingdom and after. These include relief representations and texts from the temples of Amun at Karnak, Seti I at Abydos, Ramesses III at Medinet Habu, Horus at Edfu, Hathor at Dendera.⁶ A full version of the ritual is preserved in a papyrus dating to the 22nd Dynasty.⁷ Although the Daily Ritual is not attested before the New Kingdom, the act of presenting offerings to cult statues dates back to much earlier periods.⁸

While the best evidence for understanding the ritual comes from these texts and representations, the few stone shrines surviving from ancient Egypt allow us to better visualize the ceremony. These shrines, usually around 20 inches in height, would have held a smaller wooden shrine inside of which stood the metal statue of the god.⁹ Although the Karnak relief scenes depict the god and the king at the same scale, this is done to represent the importance of the god. In reality, his image, although splendidly crafted of gold, silver, and precious wood, would have measured only a little more than one foot high.

Discussion of individual rituals

The temple scenes and papyri describing the Daily Ritual isolate thirty-six separate actions and spells recited (here labeled “episodes”) as vital components. These can be divided up thematically into separate groups:

- opening rituals (episodes A-E)
- rituals of offering roasted meat (episodes 1-8)
- rituals involving the presentation of other foods and drink, the pouring of libations, and the burning of fragrant spices for purification (episodes 9-25)
- closing rituals (episodes 26-31)

The first group of rituals took place once the priest had reached the sanctuary, but before he had opened the shrine. The remaining episodes began after the shrine doors had been opened, and continued through the closing of the shrine and the exit of the priest. Following these rites, the priest redistributed the food and drink offered to the statue of the god among the temple personnel. This act was also imbued with cultic significance, and it constituted a separate group of scenes, known as the “reversion of offerings.”



Seti I draws back the door bolt on Amun-Ra's shrine (Episode C).

5 Barta 1972; Shafer 1997
6 Barta 1972
7 Lorton 1999: 131
8 Shafer 1997: 22-23
9 Lorton 1999: 126-128

Rituals of the Reversion of Offerings (episodes 34-40)¹⁰

None of the temple reliefs used as the sources for reconstruction of the Daily Ritual record the complete sequence of actions and spells for performance.¹¹ Nine of the thirty-six main episodes were included on the east interior wall of the hypostyle hall in the Amun temple at Karnak. All seven of the Reversion of Offering episodes are represented as well.¹² A significant portion of the wall where these scenes are located has been completely destroyed, and the number of additional episodes that would have originally been present cannot be determined. Nine of the Daily Ritual's spells, most of which represent scenes missing at Karnak, can be found at the temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu.¹³

Episode-by-episode views and description of the preserved scenes:¹⁴

The Daily Ritual scenes were part of the decorative program for Karnak's great hypostyle hall, constructed by king Sety I. They were carved onto a stone facing added against the exterior (or west face) of the north tower of Amenhotep III's third pylon when the area was roofed over with stone slabs. Recesses for the pylon's original wooden flagstaffs remained, dividing the wall up into four separate sections. The scenes discussed here in depth were located on the two northern most wall sections.

The opening rituals (episodes A-E)

At Karnak, only episodes B, C and D are depicted. These are located on the lowest, or first, register of the wall's north section. In all three scenes the statue of the divinity Amun-Ra, portrayed the same size as the king to emphasize the god's importance, stands within a uraeus-topped naos or shrine. Episode B, on the left, shows king Sety I breaking the seal on Amun's shrine. Episode C, in the center, depicts the drawing back of the shrine's bolt. The slim lock is visible in the king's right hand. Finally, on the right, Sety opens the doors of the shrine and views the face of Amun's statue.

Episodes A and E were originally included at the temple of Medinet Habu, although E is now fully destroyed. In episode A, shown here, king Ramesses III burns incense to the uraeus, a goddess no doubt called upon here for her protective powers.

Rituals of offering roasted meat (episodes 1-8)

While many of the scenes are broken, a few of the roasted meat offering scenes are present at Karnak. The first and second episodes, detailing the king preparing an altar for burnt offerings, are missing. In episodes three and four, located on the first register, middle section, the king puts incense and fat upon the altar's

10 Nelson 1949a

11 Barta 1972

12 Nelson 1949a

13 Nelson 1949a, b

14 The following descriptions of episodes are based directly on: Nelson 1949a, b; Nelson and Murnane 1981. Information from other sources is footnoted individually.

flame. According to the text, both actions are shown in one scene, but this area is so destroyed that image of the king, possibly shown kneeling before the god in his shrine, has completely disappeared.

Episodes five, six, and seven are also not included in the preserved scenes. Episode eight, which concludes the group, is a spell for offering a libation of beer with the meat offerings. The relief depicting the king kneeling before the statue of the god again has been destroyed.

Rituals involving the presentation of other foods and drink, the pouring of libations, and the burning of fragrant spices for purification (episodes 9-25)

Offerings of white bread, cake and beer comprise episodes nine, ten, and eleven, none of which are shown at Karnak. Episode twelve, the presentation of wine for the gardens, is located on the first register of the north section. The king, whose image was later removed when a doorway was cut into this part of the hall, presumably faced the portable bark of Amun. Arrayed on its stand within a covered shrine, the lavishly decorated bark is fronted by a number of offerings.

Episodes thirteen through sixteen, also missing, include offerings of milk, libations and incense for purification, a “first libation,” and a “second libation” respectively. An illustration of the last scene exists at Medinet Habu. King Ramesses III, standing before Amun, is shown pouring a libation from two jars into a pair of T-shaped basins.

Included in the Karnak reliefs is the next episode, number seventeen. Here, the king performs the rite of “salutation with the *nemset* jar.” Unfortunately, the single jar offered up in the king’s hands is completely broken away.

Missing at Karnak but depicted at Medinet Habu are episodes eighteen and nineteen. In the first, the king is shown pouring another libation to the god, although the accompanying text describes him as burning incense, possibly a mistake made by the artist. The second rite describes the king purifying the room with myrrh. In the relief scene, the king holds a censor over a laden offering table and tall stands.

The priest now begins to read the traditional list of offerings that the god would have expected as sustenance each day. This list, called the “menu of every day,” composes episode twenty. Following this, the priest then recites an additional list of offerings for the god, entitled “a boon which the king gives.” He subsequently lays out the mentioned offerings on the table for the god’s meal. These actions comprise episodes twenty-one and twenty-two. To prepare the god for his repast, in episodes twenty-three and twenty-four the priest pours a libation



Episode 17: The king offers the *nemset* jar to Amun-Ra.

and burns myrrh before the meal. While none of these vignettes are preserved at Karnak, the next episode, number twenty-five, can be seen at Medinet Habu. The priest, seemingly gesturing to the food and drink waiting for the god upon the offering table invites the god to satisfy his hunger and thirst. The text at Medinet Habu summons the god to “come to thy body” in order to partake of the warm bread, beer and meat provided for him. At this point, although not described, the god presumably eats and drinks until satisfied.

Closing rituals (episodes 26-31)

Having finished his meal, the god should now be placated. Episode twenty-six, from Medinet Habu, is represented only by the appropriate text, in which the king is described as placing the god back into his shrine. Episodes twenty-seven through twenty-nine, not depicted, contained spells recited to the god by the priest.

The king is shown “driving-out demons” from the shrine on the relief at Karnak in episode thirty. Sety I, slightly bent at the waist, holds a purifier reminiscent of the shape of an *ankh* sign in his right hand. In his left hand, he grasps a long bundle of *heden*, a plant associated with the god Thoth and thought to possess powers of protection.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the accompanying text is lost. At Medinet Habu, episode thirty depicts Ramesses III who holds seemingly identical items, clearly performing the same purification rituals as Sety. Episode thirty-one, only referred to textually, has Ramesses concluding the ritual by closing and bolting the doors of the shrine.

Rituals of the Reversion of Offerings (episodes 34-40)

All seven spells related to the Reversion of Offerings are included at Karnak. In this set of rites, the priest must ritually dispose of the offerings laid before the god in the Daily Ritual. Now that the god has taken his sustenance from the food and drink laid before him, they must be removed with ceremony.

Episode thirty-four is an introduction to the series, with the text explaining that the following rituals are to be performed at the temple, “upon the altar of the kings.” This may suggest that the ritual took place at a separate part of the temple where images of former kings were depicted. In the scene, the king is shown as beginning the new phase of the ritual by kneeling and pouring a libation into a T-shaped basin before the god.

The next episode, thirty-five, starts the actual process of reversion. Sety is not shown actually removing items from the table of the god, but instead kneeling and pouring another libation, this time into a stand topped by a bouquet of papyrus. The comparable episode from Medinet Habu shows the king still grasping



Episode 30: The king “drives out demons” during the closing ritual.

the purifier and *heden*-bundle from the closing rituals of episode 30. This may again signal that the Reversion rituals took place outside the shrine of the god, immediately after the king exited it after completing the closing rituals.

Once the food and drink have been taken away, the king makes new offerings to Amun-Ra, including a libation, episode thirty-six, and burnt incense, episode thirty-seven. In the latter scene, the king holds a small cup in his left hand, the flame/scent of the spice wafting up towards the god.

The king is next seen clasping two curved torches as part of episode thirty-eight, the “spell for making (e.g. lighting) the torch of every day.” Other versions of the ritual tell us that the torch would have been made from clean linen, twisted and dipped in some type of oil or fat.

The lighting of the torch is followed by episode thirty-nine, the “spell for extinguishing it (e.g. the torch).” Sety now holds the burnt and unraveling cloth down at his knee, putting out the flame.

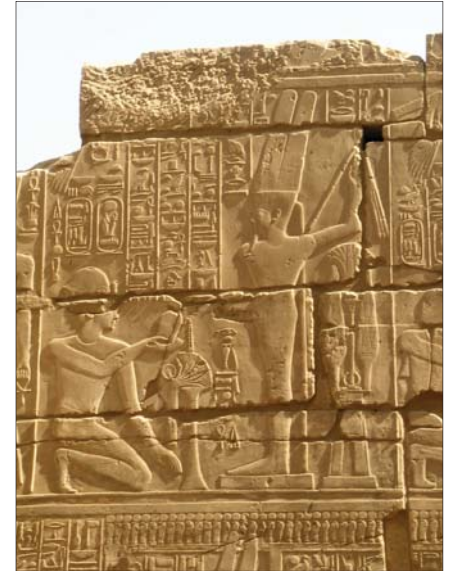
Episode 40 concludes the Reversion ritual. The long spell aims to guarantee that the offerings will endure forever. Sety is depicted with both arms raised, hands with palms down, blessing the offering-laden table before him.

Additional ritual scenes, located on bordering walls

A number of other ritual scenes of Sety I have been preserved on the bordering sections of the wall. These include scenes from the Festival of Amun (42 and 44) the First and Sixth Day Feasts (48 and 49) the New Year Festival (52-55) and the Festival of Mut (57).

Conclusion

The Daily Ritual was a vital part of the cycle of cultic ritual at the temple. The correct performance of the offerings assured continued favor from the gods. As the link between the divine realm and humanity, the king played a key role in the ritual, and therefore it is he who is shown performing the offerings at Karnak in perpetuity.



Episode 36: The king makes new libations to Amun-Ra.

Works Cited

- Barta, Winfried
1972 Kult. In: *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Vol. 3, ed. Eberhard Otto, Wolfhart Westendorf, and Wolfgang Helck, pp. 839-847. Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz.
- Golvin, Jean-Claude, and Jean Claude Goyon
1987 *Les bâtisseurs de Karnak*. Paris: Presses du CNRS.
- Lorton, David
1999 The theology of cult statues. In: *Born in heaven, made on earth: the making of the cult image in the ancient Near East*, ed. Michael Brennan Dick, pp. 123-210. Winona Lake: Eisenbraun.
- Nelson, Harold
1949a Certain reliefs at Karnak and Medinet Habu and the ritual of Amenophis I. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 8(3), pp. 201-232.

1949b Certain reliefs at Karnak and Medinet Habu and the ritual of Amenophis I (concluded). *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 8(4), pp. 310-345.

1949c The rite of 'bringing the foot' as portrayed in temple reliefs. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 35, pp. 82-86.
- Nelson, Harold, and William Murnane
1981 *The great hypostyle hall at Karnak*. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
- Shafer, Byron
1997 Temples, priests and rituals. In *Temples of ancient Egypt*, ed. Byron Shafer, pp. 1-30. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Short Citation:
Sullivan 2008, Daily Ritual. *Digital Karnak*.

Full Citation:
Sullivan, Elaine, 2008, Daily Ritual. On *Digital Karnak*, Los Angeles. <http://dlib.etc.ucla.edu/projects/Karnak>.