



COLNAGHI

Antonio Beato

*The Pillars of Upper and Lower Egypt,
Karnak*

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Antonio Beato (1825 – 1906)

The Pillars of Upper and Lower Egypt, Karnak

Albumen print

26 x 20 cm;

10 1/4 x 7 3/4 in.

Provenance

Galerie Sylvain di Maria, Paris;
Private collection, Netherlands.

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At the centre of this composition two slender granite pillars rise within a dramatic breach in the massive inscribed walls of the Temple of Amun-Re at Karnak. Carved in raised relief, they bear the heraldic plants of the Two Lands: the lotus of Upper Egypt and the papyrus of Lower Egypt. Their crisp, sculptural forms are set here against the bright, empty sky and framed by the broken courses of the hieroglyph-covered sandstone that arch overhead. Two Egyptian men, one standing in dark robe and turban, and the other seated amongst the fallen blocks, are placed at the foot of the pillars—a device Beato repeatedly employed to give scale to the monuments and to anchor their colossal architecture in human presence.

These pillars are among the most celebrated features of the temple. Erected by Thutmose III (reign c. 1479 – 1425 B.C.) of the Eighteenth Dynasty, the pairing of lily and papyrus here expressed the union of Upper and Lower Egypt under his rule. He built Egypt's only known set of heraldic pillars, two large columns standing alone instead of forming part of a set supporting the roof. The two red granite pillars survive today in the Hall of Annals of Thutmose III within the Karnak temple complex. Beato's viewpoint, looking through the ruined wall, turns this archaeological subject into a carefully constructed image in which the standing pillars are silhouetted within a frame of toppled masonry.

Antonio Beato (c. 1825 – 1906), also known as Antoine Beato, was an Italian-British photographer noted for his views of the architecture and landscapes of Egypt, and the younger brother of the photographer Felice Beato (1832 – 1909). After working alongside his brother in Malta, Greece, the Holy Land and India, he moved to Cairo in 1860, lived there for two years before finally settling in Luxor, where he established a studio and spent the rest of his life photographing the local culture. Noted for his Egyptian architectural photography, he spent most of his career selling high-quality prints to the visitors who flocked to Cairo and Luxor, and his documentation of the ancient monuments remains an invaluable record of how they appeared in the nineteenth century.

Working from Luxor placed Beato at the centre of the great Theban sites, and his views of Karnak, Luxor, Dendera, Edfu, Philae, and Abu Simbel were sold individually and compiled into souvenir albums by travellers on the Nile. Since some of the monuments he recorded have since been defaced or altered, his albumen prints are an especially valuable archaeological record. His Egyptian work belongs to the founding repertoire of commercial photography in the country, examples of which are now preserved in major public collections, including the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Harvard Art Museums.