

# **Ancient Voices from the Philae Island: The Heritage of Speaking Stones**

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## **Abstract**

Ancient inscriptions are an important component of the cultural heritage which helps us understand the development of societies. Such inscriptions reflect both personal and official interactions with past events. Many different ethnic communities visited Egypt and then left their inscriptions in different scripts and languages in various parts of the country. Questions that arise here are: Why did these communities visit Philae Island? And what is the heritage of ancient inscriptions on Philae Island?

This paper tries to give a contextual overview and a reasoning of the heritage of ancient inscriptions that were left by different peoples who lived or visited Philae Island. In addition, this paper will try to establish a step forward in the history of writing and its development in Egypt through the ages. Shedding light on the content of such inscriptions would help better understand the historical, social and religious aspects of Philae, and thus improve management of the cultural heritage of the island. Finally, it should be noted that this contribution is not intended as a catalogue of the inscriptions left on the island; it will however highlight the island's rich cultural heritage, which may serve as a determining factor in any future restoration processes of the island's facilities. In other words, this paper suggests a different and innovative approach to a historical study of the island, and that is through a reading of its inscriptions.

The paper is divided into three parts: firstly, the historical impacts on the development of the island buildings and their decoration, followed by a survey of ancient inscriptions, and thirdly, an analysis and commentary.

## **Keywords**

Philae complex, history of writing, demotic, Greek, Coptic, graffiti, Meroites, Isis worship, virtual museum.

## **Part One: Historical Impacts on the Development of the Island Buildings and their Decoration**

Philae Island is located at the first Cataract, to the south of the Aswan Dam. It included the last pagan temples in ancient Egypt, which were later closed and transformed into churches in the sixth century CE. From the earliest times, Philae Island was oriented to the south, and the main entrance to the island was from the south. Actually, the present island is not the original Island of Philae. The original Island of Philae was submerged underwater after the construction of the high dam in the 1960s; therefore, the Philae complex was dismantled and relocated to Agilkia Island, as part of a wider UNESCO project. (Fig. 1)

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*Fig. 1 A General View of the First Cataract Area, where it shows the Philae Island.  
After Google Earth.*

and Kush) to visit the island.<sup>2</sup> The Ptolemaic era witnessed large construction activities, representing two-thirds of the temples of the island. The expansion of the Philae buildings in the Ptolemaic era was related to economic benefits, since the southern border of Egypt was enlarged by 75 miles/120.7 km (12 schoenoi), and thus the Dodekaschoinos became a sacred region of Osiris. (Fig. 2)



*Fig. 2 A General View of Ancient Egypt during the Ptolemaic Period, including the Dodekaschoinos borders. After:  
A.K. Bowman, Egypt After the Pharaohs, 332 BC-AD 642. From Alexander to the Arab Conquest (Berkeley, 1986), p. 10.*

<sup>2</sup> Sylvie Cauville, Mohamed Ibrahim Ali, *Philae Itinéraire du visiteur* (Leuven, 2013), 3.

## The dedication of Dodekaschoinos to Osiris is represented in two places on the island:

- The temple of Osiris and Arensnuphis:<sup>3</sup> There are three registers that decorate each door of the Ptolemaic part of the temple. At the bottom of the door, Osiris is depicted receiving the land domain from Ptolemy VI. According to Cauville and Ali, the land domain is usually represented at the bottom of the wall of the temple. The land domain refers here to the great land ‘Dodekaschoinos’. Among the remarkable scenes of the eastern wall of the temple of Osiris and Arensnuphis is the dedication of Dodekaschoinos to Isis instead of Osiris. The text reads ‘Offering the domain to his mother the Powerful, Isis who gives the life, the mistress of the Pure Island, the sovereign of Philae, twelve *schoenoi* at the west, twelve *schoenoi* at the east from Takmopso to Aswan’.<sup>4</sup>
- The Dodekaschoinos stela (29 July 157 BCE = year 24 of Ptolemy VI). It is a granite block of 200 kg, which indicates the large domain of the priests of Isis. At the right part of the stela, the king offers to Osiris and Isis the territory of Dodekaschoinos. At left, the king receives the scepter of surveillance. The text of the stela confirms the donation of the Dodekaschoinos—120 km to the priests of Isis. It is probable that the city El-Maharraqa corresponds to the ancient toponym of Takompso.<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 3)



*Fig. 3 The Dodekaschoinos Stela. Taken by the author.*

Under Ptolemy V and his wife Cleopatra I the temple of Imhotep was founded around 187 BCE. On the western part of the temple, Ptolemy V is figured, performing some funerary tasks for Imhotep, purifying him with water and incense. An interesting hieroglyphic inscription gives us important personal details about Imhotep and his family such as the day and the month of Imhotep's birth. It corresponds to the 16<sup>th</sup> of the month of Epiphi. He was born at Memphis; his mother's name is Kheredetankhet, and his wife is Renpetnefret. The two ladies are figured behind him. His wife raises his right hand as a sign of protection.<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 4)

<sup>3</sup> Cauville, Ali, *Philae Itinéraire du visiteur*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Cauville, Ali, *Philae Itinéraire du visiteur*, 45.

<sup>5</sup> Cauville, Ali, *Philae Itinéraire du visiteur*, 186.

<sup>6</sup> Cauville, Ali, *Philae Itinéraire du visiteur*, 82–85.



*Fig. 4 Imhotep is represented as defied, before him Ptolemy V offers to him the natron, while Imhotep's mother and wife stand behind him.  
After: <http://www.temples-egypte.net/philae/imhotep/scenesImhotep.html>*

During the Roman rule of ancient Egypt, many buildings were added, among them the so-called 'Gate of Hadrian'. It is actually a passageway.<sup>7</sup> The importance of this building is that it is the latest cultic building on Philae with appropriate temple reliefs. The reliefs date to between 117 and 180 CE. Furthermore, the gate is important as it faces Biga Island and served as a departure point for the bark procession of Isis to visit Osiris at the Abaton. Among other things, the Abaton decree with regulations concerning the cult of Osiris on Biga Island is already recorded on the walls of the gate.<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 5)



*Fig. 5 Gate of Hadrian. Taken by the author.*

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. G. Haeny, 'A Short Architectural History of Philae', BIFAO 85 (1985), 215–216.

<sup>8</sup> G. Hölbl, *Altägypten im Römischen Reich: Der römische Pharao und seine Tempel*, Vol. II: *Die Tempel des römischen Nubien* (Mainz, 2004), 96, fig. 129.



Diocletian ordered the borders of Egypt to be set at Elephantine rather than the Dodekaschoinos.<sup>9</sup> The region fell in the hands of the Meroitic kingdom until the beginning of the Fourth century and the Noubades and Blemmyes invaded it only after Meroe's fall, around 330/350 CE. Instead of the Noubades, it was to the Meroites that the Romans offered control upon the Dodekaschoinos.<sup>10</sup>

By the fourth and fifth centuries, Christianity started to extend to different parts in Egypt. Thus, Philae received the first Christians who started to convert some parts of the island into cultic places for the new religion (see below).

## Part Two: Survey of Ancient Inscriptions: Type and Context

In the spaces on the island that were disputed between different ethnic and religious communities, languages became power. Each group of followers considered graffiti a tool that reflected the piety of the visitors and the holiness of the temple. Therefore, the decline of indigenous rule of ancient Egyptian kings didn't fundamentally mean the end of the culture of ancient Egypt. On the contrary, many examples show cultural continuities with the preceding era. The criteria according to which example of the inscriptions are chosen, depends on the historical, religious or political importance. Besides, some examples are mentioned for the sake of its significant date (the last demotic graffiti known in Egypt, as an example).

## Demotic Inscriptions

Demotic is the most cursive form of the ancient Egyptian scripts, and it would endure for over a thousand years. In the earliest period, Demotic was used for legal, administrative and commercial purposes. Under the Ptolemies, the use of the script was extended to all kinds of texts, but the introduction of Greek gradually removed Demotic from public life. After Greek became the dominant script in public use, Demotic was pushed to the sidelines and eventually restricted to the religious context of the temple.<sup>11</sup>

What makes the Isis temple at Philae so important for this study is that all of the very last dated Demotic texts are found there. When the pilgrims reached the temple of Isis and offered their homages to Isis, they were keen to leave graffiti<sup>12</sup> on the pylon and the walls of the forecourt.<sup>13</sup> A highest percentage of Philae graffiti can be found at the Isis temple, and it represents 35% of all of the graffiti at Philae.

## Notes on the Demotic inscriptions on the island

It is surprising that the Demotic graffiti of Philae (450 examples) was still being written in the fourth and fifth centuries. It seems that Demotic stood as a sacred script. After the collapse of the Meroitic Kingdom in the fourth century, few graffiti survived from the Dodekaschoinos as few persisted in using the script for a long time, under special circumstances.<sup>14</sup>

Cruz-Uribe mentioned that graffiti could be found in an area of the temple that is not active. The non-active areas of the temple were those not in use for daily or regular religious activities. The visitors to the temple were not allowed to tour the entire temple areas, but were restricted to certain parts of the temple, such as the main gates and courtyards.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, once an area was no longer in regular use for religious purposes, it became a good candidate for graffiti. For example, the graffiti near the sanctuary would indicate that those areas of the temple were not in official use over time.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cauville, Ali, *Philae Itinéraire du visiteur*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> See Eide, T., Hägg T. et al., 1998, *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum* III, 1188-1193.

<sup>11</sup> Dijkstra, *Religious encounters*, 57–58.

<sup>12</sup> For examples of the proscynemes, Cf. Bernand, *JG I* 207–208, no. 21; 209, no. 22; 331–332, no. 61.

<sup>13</sup> Bernand, *JG I*, 46–47.

<sup>14</sup> H. Stephen, J. Baines, J. Cooper, 'Last Writing: Script Obsolescence in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Mesoamerica'. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45(3) (2003), 433.

<sup>15</sup> Cruz-Uribe, in: Bács, (ed.), *Studies in Honor of Ernő Gáál*, 179.

<sup>16</sup> Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, 27f.

## The Last Demotic Graffiti Known in Egypt

It is accepted that the latest known Demotic inscription was recorded in the temple of Isis on Philae Island, and it dates back to the fifth century CE.<sup>17</sup> It is Ph. 377, and dates to 11 December 452 CE. It is located on the roof of the pronaos to the Isis temple on the south side (under the light fixture from the Sound and Light show).<sup>18</sup> This short Demotic graffito commemorates the festival of Osiris in the month of Choiak and also the transport of the statue of Isis from Philae to Biga at ten-day intervals. The graffito reads: 'The feet of Panekhatekhem'. Perhaps it belonged to another pair of feet behind it, which have now disappeared.<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 6)



Fig. 6 The Last Demotic Inscription. Courtesy of Cruz-Uribe(†).

Smith gives an important notice that many of the writers of latest graffiti at Philae were members of the same family. It is probable to find graffiti for three generations of the same family on the island or in the Dodekaschoinos.<sup>20</sup> A group of thirty-six Demotic graffiti were left by Meroites, distinguished by their names. Among these graffiti, there are seven examples written by persons who had signed at Philae and were found in other sites in the Dodekaschoinos: at Dakka, Maharraqa, Biga and Kertassi.

On the other hand, we should also refer to a couple of royal decrees of Philae, partially inscribed in Demotic. The two decrees are incised side-by-side on the southern wall of the external western façade of the Mammisi in front of the Temple of Isis. The decree on the right hand is the most recent, yet, the two decrees are contemporaneous as they date to the reign of Ptolemy V Epiphanes (186-185 BCE).<sup>21</sup>

The first –earlier– decree relates decisions that were taken by an assembly of the priests, during their meeting in the Temple of Isis at Alexandria on the 6<sup>th</sup> of September 186 BCE. This decree describes the victory of Ptolemy V over rebels in the south of Egypt, and lists the favors offered by the king to the priests. Meanwhile, the second decree relates the decisions that were taken by the assembly of priests, during their meeting at Memphis on the occasion of the installation of the Apis bull in the twenty-first year of the reign of King Ptolemy V.

Additionally, it should be emphasized that the longest Demotic inscription on the island is Ph 416. It is twenty-six lines in length, covering an entire block of stone.<sup>22</sup> It was incised on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 253 CE. It relates historical events that happened

<sup>17</sup> Griffith, *Catalogue of the Demotic Graffiti of the Dodekaschoenus I* (Oxford, 1935), 102–103 and 106, nos. 365 and 377.

<sup>18</sup> Griffith, *Catalogue of the Demotic Graffiti*, 106, no. Ph. 377. Personal communication with the late Prof. Cruz-Uribe in 2017. I would like to thank the late Prof. Uribe for providing me with a copy of this graffito.

<sup>19</sup> Griffith, *Catalogue of the Demotic Graffiti*, 106, no. Ph. 377.

<sup>20</sup> M. Smith, *Following Osiris: Perspectives on the Osirian Afterlife from Four Millennia* (Oxford, 2017), 456–457.

<sup>21</sup> Cauville, Ali, *Philae Itinéraire du visiteur*, 151–152.

<sup>22</sup> Griffith, *Catalogue of the Demotic Graffiti*, 112–119, Ph. 416.

over a period of two years. This inscription tells us that Sasas,<sup>23</sup> son of Paesis, was sent from the side of the King of Meroe to Philae to give homage to Isis in order to help faraway people. Pasan brought 10 talents of silver (about 273 kg.). (Fig. 7)



*Fig. 7 The Longest Demotic inscription on the Philae Island. Taken by author.*

The obsolescence of Demotic at Philae is also an important indicator of the end of the ancient Egyptian religion as an institution, as the temple was the center of knowledge and learning, and with the gradual death of Egyptian religious practices (as Egypt converted to Christianity), the status of the traditional languages then in use changed. Fewer and fewer individuals would have been able to read and write Demotic and Greek scripts—the former languages and scripts of priests who practiced traditional cults in Egypt, and the reason was that Egyptian priests were gradually replaced by Nubians.<sup>24</sup>

## Greek Inscriptions

Contrarily to Demotic inscriptions, the number of Greek inscriptions seems to have been fairly stable during these same five centuries. There was an interest in inscribing the graffiti in Greek language during the Roman period, particularly during the first two centuries of our era, and then Greek was less used during the third century for the sake of Demotic. This is explained by the dominance of the Meroites of the Island. The Meroites preferred to use Demotic rather than Greek.

The approximate number of Greek inscriptions from Philae is 361. The two French scholars Bernand assembled two collections of the Greek and Latin graffiti from Philae, covering the Ptolemaic (I) and Roman (II) eras.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, there are two places that remained devoid of Greek inscriptions: the Mammisi and the ‘Meroitic Chamber’, between the first and second pylon. According to Dijkstra, it was forbidden for laymen to enter the inner parts of the temple precincts or inside the Birth house; thus, priests would have inscribed demotic inscriptions on walls of the Birth house.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> See J. Pope, 2009, ‘the Proskynema of a Meroïte Envoy to Roman Egypt (Philae 416)’, *Enchoria* 31 (2008/2009), 68–103. The name is now read Sasan (note a, p. 74).

<sup>24</sup> E. Cruz-Urbe, ‘The Death of Demotic Redux: Pilgrimage, Nubia and the Preservation of Egyptian Culture’, in: (eds.), H. Knuf, *et al.* (Leuven, 2010), 499–506. 507

<sup>25</sup> The first volume contains a general introduction, meanwhile the second volume starts with a series of brief introductory sections on the location of the graffiti of Roman date, and the categories into which they fall. This volume shows the interest of the epigrams, particularly those of the professional poet, Catilius, and that of Serenus, which, uniquely, seems to show some religious feeling.

<sup>26</sup> Dijkstra, *Religious Encounters*, 61.

## Notes on the Greek Inscriptions

The Greek pilgrimage inscriptions are frequently called 'proskynemata'. It is a Greek word derived from the verb *proskunew*, 'fall down and worship'. This term 'proskynemata' appeared in Egypt for the first time in the middle of the second century BCE. The word is the adaptation of an ancient Egyptian custom to leave a name before a god (introduced by demotic *rn-f mne ty*, 'may his name remain here', or *rn nfr mni ty*, 'may the good name remain here').<sup>27</sup> Thus, the later Demotic formula *ⲗⲁ ⲙⲉⲛⲓⲧ* was derived from the Greek *προσκυνήμα*.<sup>28</sup>

The first pylon was reserved for the temple priests, and thus included a large number of Greek and Demotic graffiti. The most ancient Greek graffito on Philae Island is IG50, which dates back to the reign of Ptolemy XII (17 August, year 26 CE). It is placed on the left side of the gate of the first pylon.<sup>29</sup> (Fig.8).

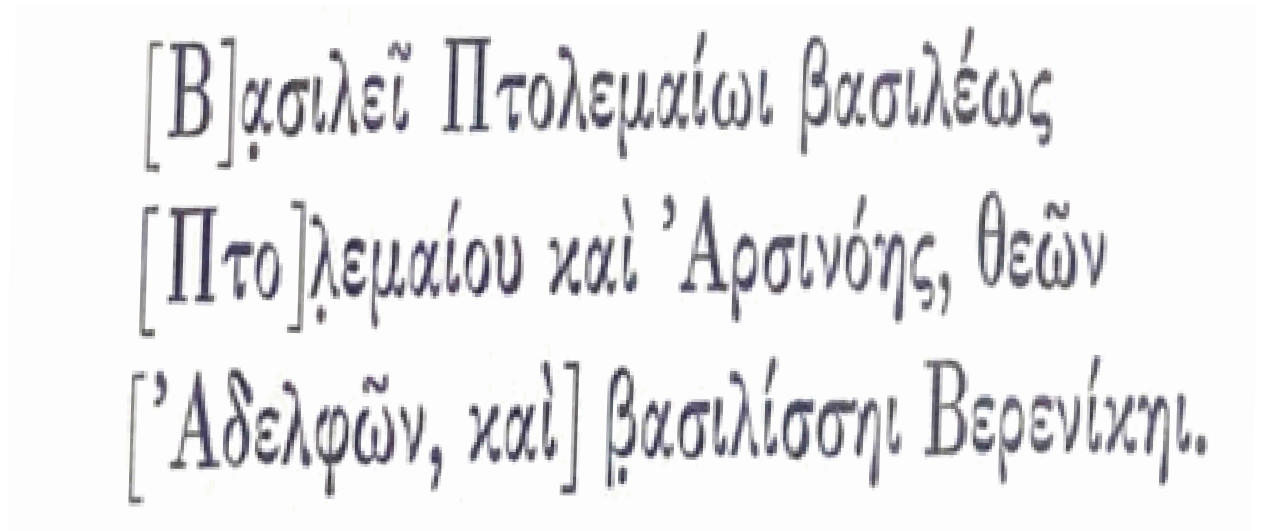


Fig. 8 The most ancient Greek graffito on Philae Island. After, *Les inscriptions grecques I*, p. 279.

One more interesting Greek inscription on the first pylon (southern pylon, southern façade, western mole) is IG61.<sup>30</sup> It dates back to 10 March, year 44 BCE. This inscription was made five days before the assassination of Caesar at Rome. It was left by a certain person named Ision, the son of Callimachus, who also left an inscription, dating back to 14 May, of the year 62 BCE.<sup>31</sup> (Fig. 9).

<sup>27</sup> Dijkstra, *Religious Encounters*, 63.

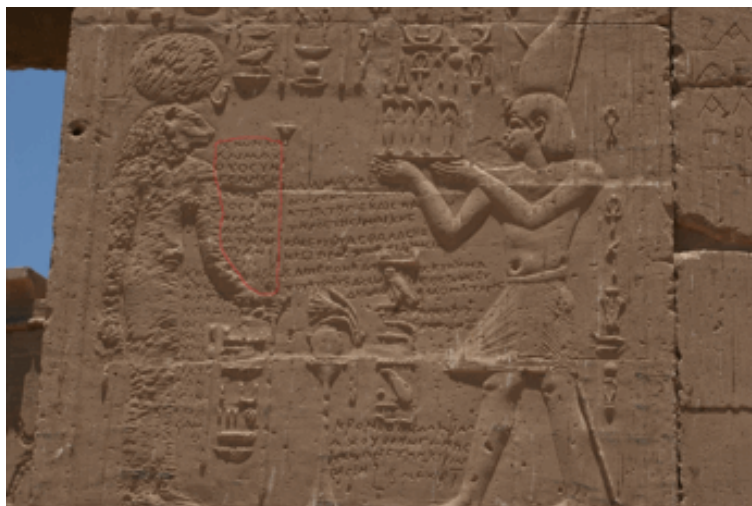
<sup>28</sup> W. Helck, 'Proskynema', *LÄ IV* (1982) 1125.

<sup>29</sup> Bernand, *IG I*, 297.

<sup>30</sup> Bernand, *IG I*, 331-332.

<sup>31</sup> Cauville, Ali, *Philae Itinéraire du visiteur*, 99.





*Fig. 9 IG61 which dates back to 10 March, year 44 BCE, i.e. five days before the assassination of Caesar at Rome. Taken by the author.*

## Demotic Inscriptions vs Greek Inscriptions in Philae

In the Ptolemaic period (323–30 BCE), there was a tendency to use Greek writing more than Demotic. There are eighty-four Greek inscriptions as opposed to twenty-eight in Demotic. In the first century BCE there are sixty-one Greek inscriptions and only fourteen in Demotic. However, this preference changed later. The Demotic inscriptions were attested from the first to fifth centuries CE, and were more frequent than Greek inscriptions. The high number of Demotic inscriptions seems to coincide with the greater involvement of the Meroites at Philae. Although the Meroites used Demotic as a model for writing their own script (Meroitic cursive), it was apparently more common to use Demotic at Philae.

In the Roman period, Greek pilgrimage inscriptions followed a fixed set of formulae. The most common opening formula is *proskynema*, followed by the name of the pilgrim and accompanied by his or her father's name and function. Then the pilgrim mentions the deity to whom the *proskynema* is addressed. He mentions in the inscription a vow for the good, and emphasizes his piety 'out of piety'). The *proskynema* may end with the date.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the analysis of the Greek and Demotic inscriptions at Philae shows that the ancient Egyptian cults did not continue unaffected at Philae in Late Antiquity. The inscriptions, usually consisting of pilgrimage inscriptions, significantly decrease in quantity. The location of the inscriptions also shows a contraction in Late Antique cultic activity, for they are found ever closer to the main Temple of Isis.<sup>33</sup>

## Meroitic Inscriptions

The Meroitic kingdom flourished from c. 300 BCE to 300 CE. The Meroites came to Philae as pilgrims to worship Isis, and also as political envoys who served as diplomats for their king in Meroë in his dealings with the Roman rulers of Egypt.

The earliest examples of Meroitic cursive inscriptions, recently found by Charles Bonnet in Dukki Gel (REM 1377–78),<sup>34</sup> can be dated to the early second century BCE.<sup>35</sup> The latest text is still probably the famous inscriptions from Kalabsha, which mention king Kharamadoye

(REM 0094), and date from the beginning of the fifth century CE.<sup>36</sup> In Philae, the inscriptions left by Meroites span the first to the third centuries CE. They are inscribed in three scripts: Demotic, Greek and Meroitic. Inscriptions attributed to

<sup>32</sup> Bernand, *IG* II, 8–14

<sup>33</sup> Dijkstra, *Religious Encounters*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> REM is the acronym of Répertoire d'épigraphie méroïtique. It was created by the French scholar Jean Leclant, who is an expert researcher of the Kushite culture and the Meroitic script. REM consists of three volumes; it is the standard corpus of the best known and catalogued examples of the Meroitic script. It includes examples of both the hieroglyphic and cursive scripts. The texts are arranged by number. In total there are currently over 2000 entries in REM.

<sup>35</sup> C. Rilly, 'Les graffitis archaïques de Doukki Gel et l'apparition de l'écriture méroïtique', *Meroitic Newsletter* 30, (2003) 46–48.

<sup>36</sup> On the Meroitic inscriptions in Egypt, Cf. A. Mansour, 'Meroitic Inscriptions in Egypt' in: K. Azab, A. Mansour (eds.), *Journey of Writing in Egypt* (Alexandria, 2010), 130–135.

Meroites comprise thirty-six in Demotic, two in Greek and thirty-one inscribed in the Meroitic cursive script.<sup>37</sup>

The Meroitic inscriptions are concentrated in three areas of the temple complex of Philae: the Birth House (Mammisi), the Meroitic chamber and the Gate of Hadrian. The inscriptions which are written in both Demotic and Meroitic are concentrated in the Birth House and on the Gate of Hadrian. We should refer to two important Meroitic inscriptions at the Gate of Hadrian. REM 0119, which belongs to the king Yesbokhe-Amani. (Fig. 10)



*Fig. 10 King Yesbokhe-Amani's inscription, Philae Island. (REM 0119) Taken by the author.*

According to its paleography, it goes back to 350–300 BCE.<sup>38</sup> There is an identical inscription on the opposite wall, and the two inscriptions decorated the pilgrimage passage of the king in the Temple of Isis at Philae. REM 0121 is an adoration inscription dedicated to Isis, by a certain Yebye, who is ascribed as the messenger of Wepwawet. According to its paleography, the inscription dates back to the fourth century CE.<sup>39</sup> (Fig. 11)



*Fig. 11 An adoration inscription dedicated to Isis, by a certain named Yebye, Philae Island. (REM 0121). Taken by the author.*

The third important group of inscriptions is located in the Meroitic Chamber opposite to the Birth House and between the two pylons. The Meroitic Chamber contains Meroitic inscriptions and pictures dating to the third century CE and shows a procession of Meroitic officials. It seems that the influence of the Meroites in the third century CE was so great that they were allowed to have a separate cultic room on the island.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> S. Bumbaugh, *Meroitic Worship Of Isis as Seen Through The Graffiti of The Dodecaschoenus* (Ph.D. Diss. University of Chicago, 2009), 7.

<sup>38</sup> J. Leclant, A. Heyler, C. el Naggar, C. Carrier, C. Rilly, *Répertoire d'épigraphie méroïtique*, Tome I - REM 0001 à REM 0387 (Paris, 2000), 269.

<sup>39</sup> Leclant et al., *Répertoire d'épigraphie méroïtique*, 271.

<sup>40</sup> Bumbaugh, 'Meroitic Worship of Isis at Philae', in: Karen Exell (ed), *Egypt in its African Context: Proceedings of the conference held at The Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, 2-4 October 2009*, BAR 2204 (2011), 66–69.

## Notes on the Meroitic Inscriptions

According to Dijkstra, a study of the demotic inscriptions has defined a group of thirty-six graffiti left by Meroites. They are pilgrimage inscriptions and are distinguished by the Meroite names. These inscriptions are longer and contain extra personal and religious feelings, such as appeasing prayers.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the inscriptions give us a picture of the importance of Isis as well as the communal nature of her worship as celebrated in the month of Khoiak and Isis' Festival of Entry. The inscriptions mention the festivals in which the Meroites participated as well as the rich gifts of gold that they brought from their king. The principal festivals mentioned occurred in the month of Khoiak, the celebration of Osiris' resurrection, as well as Isis' Feast of Entry.<sup>42</sup> The Festival of Entry held great importance for the Meroites. The festival included a visit by Isis to the Abaton on Biga Island in order to pour milk and water libations for her husband Osiris.<sup>43</sup>

## Christian Inscriptions

In the fourth and fifth centuries, Egyptian Christianity became more widespread, and by the sixth century, it had become an integral part of Egyptian society. According to Dijkstra there were, probably, at least five churches in Philae: two freestanding churches (the East and the West Churches) and three churches built in or nearby ancient Egyptian temples (the Temple of Isis, the Temple of Augustus and the Temple of Arensnuphis). The freestanding churches were probably the first to be erected on the northern part of the island.<sup>44</sup> (Fig. 12)



*Fig. 12 The freestanding churches erected on the northern part of the island. Taken by the author.*

The ancient Egyptian reliefs were hacked away, and the Isis temple reused as a church dedicated to Saint Stephan in 537 CE. Large crosses have been incised next to the doorways as a sign terminating the pagan cults.<sup>45</sup> The foundation inscription of the church of Saint Stephen is already located on the right-hand side of the entrance to the second pylon. The text reads: "This

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<sup>41</sup> Dijkstra, *Religious Encounters*, 65–66; Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions*, nos. 95–6, 121–5 = REM 0095–6, 0121–5.

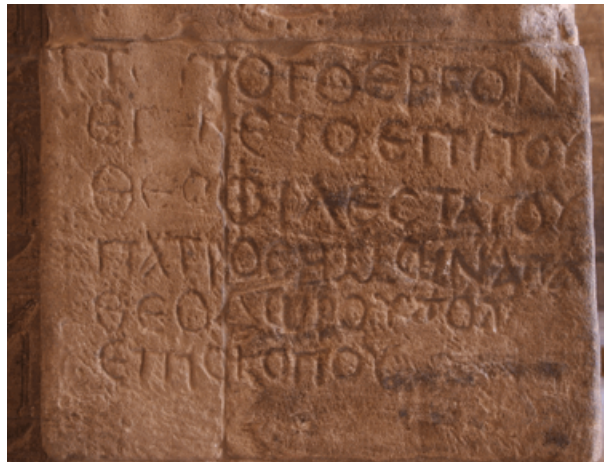
<sup>42</sup> Philae was closely linked with the Abaton: Isis was the deity in charge of reviving Osiris, she was the giver of life, the protectress of Osiris, and therefore she was worshipped in order to expect a good yield in return. In the Gateway of Hadrian on Philae, two Ptolemaic decrees have been recorded in hieroglyphic which give us a clear impression of the cult. One of the most important rituals was the ferrying of Isis across the Nile from the gateway to the Abaton every ten days (the Egyptian week) to unite her symbolically with her husband and to perform the customary rites. Milk and water libations were poured and food was laid down for the dead deity. Although access to the Abaton was prohibited for pilgrims, they could watch the scene of the crossing of Isis from the colonnade that had been built in the reign of Augustus. See: L.V. Žabkar, *Hymns to Isis in Her Temple at Philae* (Hanover, 1988) 51.

<sup>43</sup> Bumbaugh, in: Exell (ed), *Egypt in its African Context: BAR 2204* (2011), 66.

<sup>44</sup> Dijkstra, *Religious Encounters*, 170.

<sup>45</sup> Dijkstra, *Religious Encounters*, 126; Bernard, *IG II*, 251–68

topos became, in the name of the holy and consubstantial Trinity, the house of Saint Stephen under our most God-loving father, Bishop Apa Theodorus. May God preserve him for a very longtime”.<sup>46</sup> (Fig. 13)



*Fig. 13 The foundation inscription of the church of Saint Stephen. Taken by the author.*

As visitors enter the interior of the temple, Christian aspects of the church can be seen. Inside the hypostyle hall of the temple, the ankh signs have been replaced by the cross. Moreover, the visitor will find three Christian inscriptions. They were incised on the doorway of the naos. There is an inscription on each side of the door, and one inside on the right-hand side. The one on the left-hand side of the door reads: “+ Also this good work was done under our most holy father, Bishop Apa Theodore. May God preserve him for a very long time”.<sup>47</sup>

The other inscription on the right-hand side is similar but slightly shorter than the one on the left-hand side of the door, and it reads: “This work was done under our most God-loving father, the Bishop Apa Theodorus”.<sup>48</sup>

### Part Three: Analysis, Commentary and Suggestions

Philae has a long history of multi-ethnic pilgrimage. In the Ptolemaic period, pilgrims came from Egypt, North Africa, Crete, Greece and Asia Minor to worship the goddess of Philae. This broad spectrum of visitors probably reflects the sphere of influence of the Ptolemies, who were the first to commemorate their pilgrimages to Philae in inscriptions on the island. Nevertheless, the cases in which ethnicity is indicated are rare, and the names seem to indicate that most people came from Egypt during this period. It is likely that pilgrims came from Nubia also, but there are no pilgrimage inscriptions to prove their presence.

- **Religious Aspects of the Inscriptions**

The Ptolemaic-Roman cult of Isis and Osiris on Philae attracted numerous pilgrims and visitors,<sup>49</sup> who left hundreds of votive inscriptions and other graffiti in Demotic, Greek, Latin, and Meroitic. Certain visitors were of elevated social status, like Hermias, governor of the Thebaid; apparently also, Ptolemaic kings were among those who traveled to the island.<sup>50</sup> In Hellenistic times, devotees came from as far as Greece, Crete, and Asia Minor. During the Roman Period, we encounter pilgrims primarily from Egypt and Nubia.<sup>51</sup> In the Roman period, the wide spectrum of visitors of the preceding period becomes narrower: in this period, pilgrims only came from Egypt and Nubia.

<sup>46</sup> Bernand, IG II, no. 200, 251.

<sup>47</sup> Bernand, IG II, no. 202, 260.

<sup>48</sup> Bernand, IG II, no. 204, 367.

<sup>49</sup> Cruz-Urbe, in: Bács (ed.), *Studies in Honor of Ernő Gaál*, 176–177.

<sup>50</sup> I. Rutherford, ‘Island of the Extremity: Space, Language and Power in the Pilgrimage Traditions of Philae’, in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 134* (Leiden, 1998), 236.

<sup>51</sup> Rutherford, in: Frankfurter (ed.), *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 134*, 236.

Indeed, few places in Egypt have as many pilgrimage inscriptions as Philae. Of the Greek inscriptions made during the first three centuries CE, there are twenty-three out of a total of thirty-six (63.9%) classified as pilgrimage inscriptions, and of the Demotic inscriptions, there are seventy-two out of 102 (70.6 %).<sup>52</sup>

It is noteworthy that among visitors of the third century CE were the Meroitic delegations; they donated precious cult objects to the temple. Their strong presence is attested by the Meroitic Chamber room in the second eastern colonnade.<sup>53</sup>

- **Tourist and Tourism Inscriptions in Philae**

Philae was thought of as an attractive sightseeing place for tourists in both Ptolemaic and Roman eras. Many provincial officials visited Philae as tourists, and left their names on the walls of temples<sup>54</sup> such as Callimachus, who was epistrategos, strategos of the Indian and Red Seas. Additionally, the Prefect at Philae was expected to annually visit the island to celebrate the Nile flood in September.<sup>55</sup>

It is not easy to make specific distinctions between tourists and pilgrims, as some visitors made the touristic pilgrimage. Some inscriptions, such as the repeated epigram: ‘Having travelled over the great expanse of the fruitful Nile, I [X], have come to the great goddess Isis, making a mention for good luck on behalf of my parents...’, celebrated both Isis and the physical setting of the Island and the Nile.<sup>56</sup>

The graffiti of Philae reflect an important touristic aspect of the seasonal visits to the island. According to Foertmeyer,<sup>57</sup> people preferred to visit Philae in the late autumn and winter, as indicated from the inscriptions. Philae offered neither a cure place nor an oracular response to questions, so people were not obliged to make visits during any specific time of the year.

In more modern times, the Philae Island attracted more people. For example, in the nineteenth century, Pope Gregory XVI (1765–1846, pope from 1831) sent a delegation to Egypt, mainly to Philae searching for alabaster to reconstruct the church of Saint-Paul-hors-les Murs, after its incident.<sup>58</sup> Also, the Savants of the French Expedition (1798–1801), visited Philae and left their names.<sup>59</sup> This inscription can be found on the upper wall, above the ceiling of the third hall of the eastern part of the Temple of Isis. It is dated to the 7th year of the Republic, 1799. (Fig. 14)

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<sup>52</sup> Griffith, *Catalogue of the Demotic Graffiti*, 9, Bernand, *IG II*, 8.

<sup>53</sup> Rutherford, in: Frankfurter (ed.), *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 134, 234.

<sup>54</sup> Foertmeyer, *Tourism in Graeco-Roman Egypt* 68.

<sup>55</sup> Foertmeyer, *Tourism in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, 69.

<sup>56</sup> Foertmeyer, *Tourism in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, 73.

<sup>57</sup> Foertmeyer, *Tourism in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, 77.

<sup>58</sup> Cauville, Ibrahim, *Philae Itinéraire du visiteur*, 209.

<sup>59</sup> Cauville, Ibrahim, *Philae Itinéraire du visiteur*, 232.





*Fig. 14 The Graffito of Savants of the French Expedition, which dates back to the 7<sup>th</sup> year of the Republic, 1799. Taken by the author.*

To conclude, Philae Island revealed, more than 3000 years ago, what today is termed ‘multiculturalism’. Thus, the documentation of these ancient scripts assists in adding a vital component to the cultural heritage of Egypt. It can also be clearly seen that there are three groups of visitors to Philae who left graffiti:<sup>60</sup>

- 1- The Non-Egyptians who travelled to touristic sites along the Nile, such as Memnon, the Pyramids or Philae at the First Cataract. They registered their reactions.
- 2- The second group is composed of Greek-speaking workers and soldiers, who were charged with particular tasks in the desert and other distant places, and they signed with the name of their titles.
- 3- The third category included Egyptians and Nubians who made pilgrimages to Philae and left their graffiti.

The Philae ancient inscriptions include firstly the ordinary temple religious texts that were transmitted from traditional temple texts. Secondly, visitors left their graffiti in short and long texts. The graffiti were written in different places in the temple according to the accessibility permitted to the visitors. For example the last Hieroglyphic inscription (394 CE) was incised inside the gate of Hadrian. (Fig.15).

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<sup>60</sup> Foertmeyer, *Tourism in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, 76.



*Fig. 15 The last hieroglyphic inscription (394 CE). Taken by the author.*

Thirdly, the commemorative texts that emphasize particular events such as the Dodekaschoinos Stela or the dedication of Dodekaschoinos are also present. Both Ptolemaic kings and Roman emperors were keen to document important historical events, such as the erection of an obelisk, or a stela; they may also have wanted to depict a special relief on a temple wall.

In summary, this paper considers the importance of the many ancient inscriptions on Philae Island, and suggests that these should be taken into consideration when studying, documenting, visiting, and developing the island. In a recent publication by Sylvie Cauville and Mohamed Ibrahim Ali, a comprehensive visitor's itinerary of the island provided details and full descriptions. I would take this occasion to add to their itinerary by focusing attention on the ancient inscriptions and particularly, on their content. Finally, it would be useful to develop a virtual museum application that can preserve the heritage of ancient scripts and inscriptions, in order to best document, preserve and display these inscriptions.

## **Suggestions for the Documentation and Display of the Heritage of Inscriptions**

The year 2017 was declared the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, which was announced both in recognition of the vast potential of the tourism industry and to encourage the expansion of the sector towards sustainability. This is a unique opportunity to consider the Island of Philae as an open museum of ancient scripts and Inscriptions to build a more responsible and committed development that can capitalize its immense potential in terms of cultural and environmental preservation. In this cadre, an innovative approach has been developed over the recent years in order to preserve the heritage of ancient scripts and inscriptions.

The DLIC is a digital archive for the writings and inscriptions on buildings and monuments throughout the ages. These inscriptions are displayed on the website of the Digital Library of Inscriptions and Calligraphies in digital form, which includes images and a brief description of these inscriptions. DLIC provides users to access its collections and provides specific information about each inscription.

Finally, a suggested approach is to preserve and maintain such natural museum of scripts and inscriptions through establishing a virtual museum of scripts and inscriptions. An amazing virtual tour application developed in-house by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, demonstrating the Antiquities Museum on premises.

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