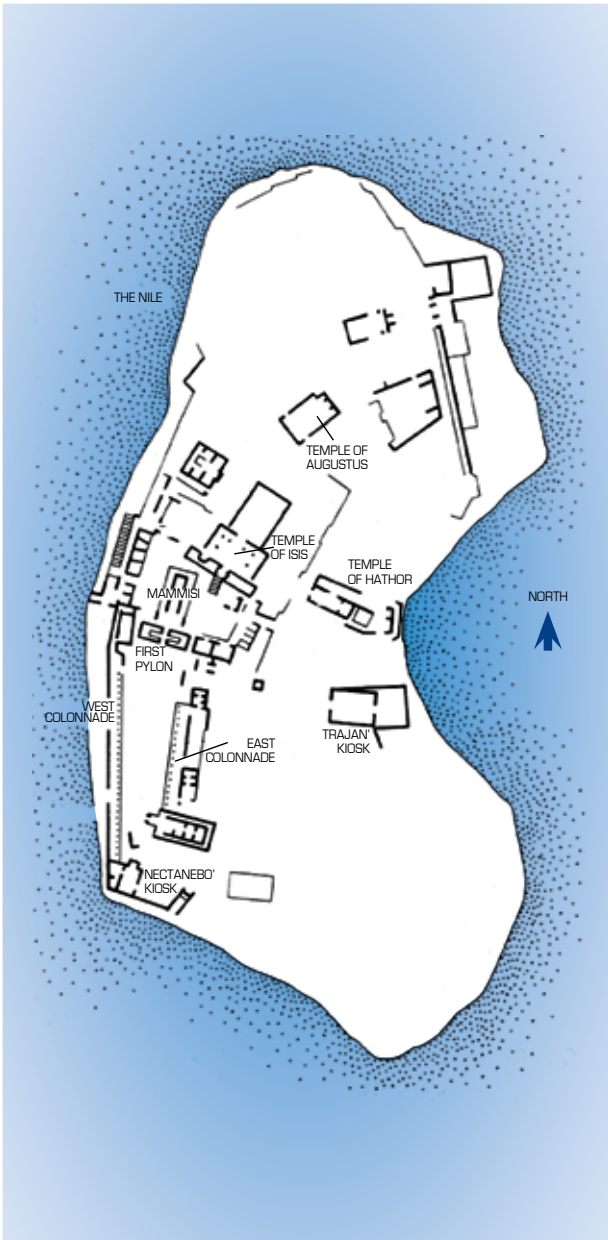


DISCOVERING OUR HERITAGE

# THE TEMPLES OF PHILAE



TEXT BY GIHANE ZAKI



**PHILAE ISLAND AND ITS MONUMENTS**



**DISCOVERING OUR HERITAGE**

**THE TEMPLES OF PHILAE**

## A BIT OF HISTORY



On a small island in the middle of the Nile, near Egypt's southern frontier, are the Temples of Philae ①. In the 1960's, a presidential decree ordered the improvement of the Egyptian national economy, and thus the construction of a dam of "pharaonic" scale in order to increase electricity and usher in



an era of industrialization ②. This decree would have a catastrophic impact on the cultural heritage of Egypt's south, submerging sites and temples under water ③. Thus, the entire Philae temple complex was completely dismantled and moved to a new, higher island to save it from the rising water of the Nile behind the newly constructed High Dam. Imagine moving a whole temple!



Located just above the First Cataract of the Nile, Philae lies only a few meters away from its twin, Biggeh, which was thought to be one of the burial place of Osiris ④, and was therefore highly revered by the Egyptians in ancient times. It was called "the pure island" and "an unapproachable place" because no one but



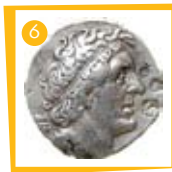
priests could live there or visit the island. It was also thought that birds would not fly over it and that fish would not swim near its shores.

## ONCE UPON A TIME ...

Ancient Egyptian texts refer to Philae as "the island of time." The most ancient testimony of religious presence on the island dates back to New Kingdom. Therefore, the first temple structure to be built on the island was assembled at the order of King Nectanebo, founder of the thirteenth dynasty and was dedicated to Isis **5**. Throughout time, the temple gained in significance while the cult of Isis grew stronger all over Egypt, especially in the surrounding region.



Philae Temples were later empowered by the rulers of Alexandria. Under Ptolemy II Philadelphos **6**, the revenues of the land extending 120 km to the south of the island was dedicated to the priests of Isis. Moreover, the rapids of the Nile in the area forced boats to land their goods and transport them overland, through Philae, which was another source of wealth that the priests exploited in order to strengthen their power.



The principal deity of the temple complex was Isis, but minor temples and shrines were dedicated to other deities like her son Horus in his several aspects ; such as his Greek form under the name of Harendotes, and his Nubian form, where he is called Mandoulis. Another important shrine is dedicated to the famous Egyptian architect Imhotep (builder of Saqqara pyramid) under the Greek name of Asklepius.

For centuries, the temple complex was the holiest site for Isis worshippers **7**. It used to be believed that the temple was officially closed down in the 6th century A.D. by the Byzantine emperor, Justinian (527-565 AD), but recent research on the history of the



Isis religion has proved that the cult remained active until the ninth century **8**. In fact, Philae in Egypt and Baalbak in Lebanon were the two last bastions of pagan religion in the Middle East. At this time, within the Philae complex, a church occupied the hypostyle hall in the heart of Isis temple (where we can see the foundation decree signed by Apa Theodore on 537), an Islamic minaret called «Mi'zanet Bilal» had been erected on the western portion of the island to serve Muslim merchants passing through the region, and a few poor remaining priests of Isis wandered around trying to survive off of the lingering Nubian zealots and the last of the pilgrims to the sanctuary.



## THE ISLAND OF PHILAE'S ECLIPSE .... ISIS BECAME PRINCESS WARD !



In the Middle Ages the island was vacated by the few inhabitants who were living on top of old pharaonic ruins and Philae was abandoned 9.

However, the island's spiritual legacy was kept alive in the people's memory as having been a legendary place, to the extent that one of the famous stories from A Thousand and One Nights took place on the island and was consisting on the love story of the brave Anas El-Wogoud and his beloved the Princess Ward.



The tale recounts that the Princess Ward had been imprisoned by her father, the Sultan, in one of the towers of an abandoned castle in the middle of the Nile in the « Land of Crocodiles », then, Anas, the enamored, risks extreme danger and reaches her by crossing the water on the back of crocodiles after beseeching their sympathy. It is very likely that this part of the story is inspired by the famous iconography of the temple which shows « Osiris » in mummified human being form lying on the back of a crocodile 10. At the end of the story, the two lovers are reunited and Anas returns her to her land, and married her with the consent of the King !

## RESURRECTION OF ISIS, BACK TO LIFE IN THE 1900s



Philae attracted a great deal of attention in the nineteenth century, and was commonly visited by tourists. Amelia Edwards, a British novelist in 1873-1874 11, described her visit as follows : *«The approach by water is quite the most beautiful... Seen from the level of a small boat, the island, with its palms, its colonnades, its pylons, seems to rise out of the river like a mirage. Piled rocks frame it on either side, and the purple mountains close up the distance. As the boat glides nearer between glistening boulders, those sculptured towers rise higher and even higher against the sky. They show no sign of ruin or age. All looks solid, stately, perfect. One forgets for the moment that anything is changed. If a sound of antique chanting were to be borne along the quiet air – if a procession of white-robed priests bearing aloft the veiled ark of the God, were to come sweeping round between the palms and pylons – we should not think it strange».*

These visits were only a sampling of the great interest that Victorian-era Britain had for Egypt. Soon, tourism to Philae became common – something that remains true to this day.

## THE RELIGIOUS COMPLEX OF PHILAE AND THE HIGH DAM : A CHALLENGE BETWEEN HERITAGE AND ECONOMY

Philae was first threatened by the Nile's waters in 1902 when the Aswan Dam was completed on the Nile River. The dam was heightened twice, from 1907-12 and from 1929-34, at which point the island of Philae was nearly always flooded. Because of the damage that this constant water exposure was having on the temple, it was thought that the temples should be relocated, piece by piece, to a nearby island. Rather than carrying out this plan at that time, the temples' foundations and other architectural supporting structures were strengthened instead. Although the buildings were physically secure, the island's attractive vegetation and the colors of the temples' reliefs had been washed away. Still subjected to the river's lapping, the bricks of the Philae temples soon became encrusted with silt and other debris carried by the Nile.



By the 1960's, the island of Philae was submerged all year round <sup>12</sup>. In a spectacular operation that gathered the efforts of more than 50 countries, the temples of Philae were rescued by dismantling the blocs and transferring them to another island in the area called Agilika <sup>13</sup>. The work started immediately after the International appeal launched from UNESCO headquarters in Paris on November 6th, 1968. In order to relocate the Temple of Philae, a large coffer dam was built encircling the island with the two rows of steel plates constructed between which a million cubic meters of sand was tipped. Once the water covering its base was pumped away, the monuments were cleaned and measured using Photogrammetry, a method that enables the exact reconstruction of the original building blocks that were used by the ancients. The salvage operation took almost 10 years (1970-1980) <sup>14</sup>.



Two years later, the newly appointed Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, showed his appreciation for the efforts in a speech he gave on December 19th, 1970 to celebrate the salvage work that had been done the region and to voice his appreciation for the spirit of cooperation the initiative had created.



## LET'S WALK TOGETHER THROUGH THE TEMPLE ...



The various elements that make up the temple complex at Philae, date to the various eras of Egypt's history, from the Pharaohs to the Caesars. The oldest remains are the kiosk of Nectanebo I (380-362 B.C.) <sup>15</sup>, which is linked to the temple through a double colonnade <sup>16</sup>. The ruins mostly date back to the Ptolemaic era, specifically to the reigns of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, Ptolemy V Epiphanes, and Ptolemy VI Philometor, with many ruins signed by Roman emperors.



In front of the pylon, stand two colossal lions in granite. In antiquity, a pair of obelisks, each 13 m high, flanked the temple's entrance.



The first pylon <sup>17</sup> consists of two big towers covered with religious scenes showing Isis, Osiris and Horus. The visitors step inside the temple across a huge door decorated by the Egyptian king Nectanebo I and are instantly surprised by the extent of scratching out that has taken place on various scenes of Isis on the two sides of the pylon. Why? Pity?

In fact, some of the demolition work is attributable to the zeal of the early Christians, and some to the policy of the Iconoclasts, who carried favor for themselves with the Byzantine court by the destruction of heathen images in addition to Christian ones.



Beyond the entrance into the principal court of the temple lies a complex chapel called "mammisi" <sup>18</sup> by Egyptologists after the terminology of Champollion, the French philologist who deciphered the ancient Egyptian language.

This place is covered with sculptures representing the birth of the Pharaoh under the figure of the god Horus, son of Isis.

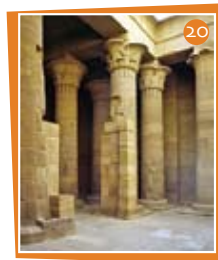
Encased in the right hand side of the second pylon, there is an interesting, huge block of granite called "Donation stela"



19. It bears a royal decree signed by the Pharaoh giving the revenues of entire regions to the south of the island to the priests of Isis. According to this decree, renewed reign after reign by all Ptolemies and even many Roman emperors, the priesthood of Philae became rich and powerful. Hieroglyphic texts and manuscripts report that the priests of Isis used to deal directly with the royal court of Alexandria some 900 km to the north, rather than with local rulers.



The entrance of the second pylon leads the visitors to the Hypostyle Hall 20. This hall of columns is particularly full of history, since it bears scenes reflecting the rituals performed by the priests of Isis and the traces of the foundation decree of a Coptic church that took place over there in 537.



Behind the Hypostyle Hall, there is a multitude of 10 chambers, all dedicated to the myth of Osiris, the most beautiful scene of this myth is depicted here and there on the walls, for example, the scenes of which mainly represent the image of Isis suckling her child Horus and her representation with two wings assuring the protection and resurrection of her husband, Osiris.

The central room is considered as the «holy of the holies» and its walls are covered with row after row of the most wonderful depictions of Isis, where she is seen standing behind her husband, suckling her son, protecting both of them, or backed in her combat against negative forces with the two ladies of the Cataract region, Satis, with the sopedet star on her crown, and Anoukis, the Nubian goddess with a feather crown.

South of the great temple there is a charming kiosk called kiosk of Emperor Hadrien (117 A.D.) 21 wellknown with its very large quay from where you can have a splendid view overlooking the rocks remaining from the primary location of the Island.



Next to the kiosk there is a small temple dedicated to Hathor, goddess of love and beauty 22 and where we can see one of the most famous representations of god Bes 23, god of joy and music, playing on his harp.



## CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION OF THE ISLAND

Philae is part of the Heritage site of Nubia: From Aswan to Abu Simbel, inscribed in 1979 on the World Heritage List. Recently, the Ministry of Antiquities executed a site management plan and the flux of tourists is now under control.

You too can help us to protect these historical monuments by respecting these guidelines :

- please do not write on walls, nor on the signs posted throughout the site

- please look but do not touch the reliefs because they are fragile

- please do not throw rubbish on the ground ; dispose of trash properly.



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English translation by Gihane Zaki

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