

## Philae

### Geographical Location

The island of Philae, located amid the first cataract some 7 kilometres south of modern Assuan (ca. 24°01'17 N, 32°53'20 E), housed an ancient settlement (Locher 1999, 123) and one of the most extensive and best preserved temple complexes of Graeco-Roman Egypt (plan in fig. 1; fig. 2). Together with the Abaton on the neighbouring island of Bigga, Philae was the most important cultic centre of Isis and Osiris in Upper Egypt and Nubia. According to the ground plan published by Lyons in 1896, the island measured c. 360 metre in length (orientated south-north) and c. 160 metre in width. Today it is submerged in the lake between the Old Assuan dam and the modern Nasser high dam. For their preservation, the monuments of Philae were transferred to the nearby island of Agilkia (see below).

### Name

(PA-) Irk (Coptic pilak, pilakx, Arabic بلق; Timm 1984, 392), the Egyptian denomination of Philae, is attested only from the 30<sup>th</sup> dynasty (Nectanebo I) onward, unlike the name of Bigga (ꜥnm.t), known since dynasty 12 (Giammarusti/Roccati, 55; Haeny 1985, 200; Sethe(†) 1935, 6, 11). Before the 30<sup>th</sup> dynasty, Philae island may have been called “Takompso” (Winter 1982, 1025).

The meaning of (PA-) Irk, which is probably of Nubian origin, remains obscure. In the Roman Period, local priests interpreted this toponym as PA-iw-rk “the island of time” or “the island of the past” (Kákosy 1968). Phonetically, the Greek denomination Φίλαι (Calderini/Daris 1987, 79; Latin “Philae”) takes account of the Egyptian term “Pilak” (Hölbl 2004, 41; Locher 1999, 121-128); it is explained by classical authors as “(fem.) friends” or “friendship” (Dijkstra 2008, 142; Rutherford 1998, 233).

### Monuments of the Site

Old Philae comprised more than a dozen of still standing monuments, dating from the end of the Late Period to Christian times. At least three-quarters of the temple buildings were constructed and decorated during the Ptolemaic era. Most of the remaining third derives from the time of Augustus to Nero. There was also a Meroitic contribution to the sanctuaries of Philae by Ergamenes II (Arkamani), when Ptolemaic control of Upper Egypt was temporarily lost in the late third and early second century BC (Winter 1981).

The main building complex of Philae is the great temple of Isis in the centre of the island (1), erected in the third and second century BC and decorated from the time of Ptolemy II onward. Apparently, Philae's upsurge is related to Ptolemaic economic beneficence, notably the endowment of the Dodekaschoinos (Dietze 1994, 69; Hölbl 1994, 78-79 and 166; Locher 1999, 152). The plan to promote the cult of Isis on Philae may go back already to Ptolemy I (Haeny 1985, 207) or Nectanebo I (Arnold 1999, 122).

The oldest remaining temple structures derive from the reign of Nectanebo I: A gate of the Late Period temple complex of Isis (Arnold 1999, 119) was integrated in the first pylon of the Ptolemaic Isis temple; a kiosk, restored under Ptolemy II, was re-erected in the south-west corner of the island (2 and fig. 3), presumably in the time between Ptolemy VIII and XII (Arnold 1999, 119; Hölbl 2004, 43; Dietze 1994, 72; Haeny 1985, 206). In addition, a small number of re-used blocks dating to Nectanebo I's reign have been detected (Farag et al. 1978).

Close to the kiosk of Nectanebo I, the modest temple of the Nubian god Arensnuphis is located (3), erected on the remains of an older building (Arnold 1999, 178). It goes back at least to Ptolemy IV; after that king, Ergamenes II (Winter 1981, 510), Ptolemy V, Ptolemy VI or VIII and Tiberius enlarged or decorated the temple respectively (Winter 1982, 1022; Haeny 1985, 220-221; Arnold 1999, 190). The sanctuary of Arensnuphis, who had a cult association on the island (Locher 1999, 138) and is not attested further north (Winter 1973, 249), is a tribute to the Nubian-Egyptian cultural environment, in which Philae is embedded.

To the north follows the large paved trapezoidal forecourt of the temple of Isis with a nilometre (Giammarusti/Roccati 1980, 32-33 and 72-73) and colonnades on either side (4 and fig. 4) (Jaritz 1991, 179; Haeny 1985, 218). The court, maybe inspired by Hellenistic public spaces (Baines 1997, 233-234), was created under Ptolemy VI or VIII (Hölbl 2004, 42) and destined to receive visitors during festivities (I. dem. Dakka 30, l. 7: Griffith 1937, 29). Its colonnades with their great variety in capital types (Arnold 1999, 149) were established in Augustean time. The 77 m long Western Colonnade with 32 columns and 12 openings in the rear wall was decorated under Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero and served as a pronaos of the sanctuaries located on the neighbouring Abaton (Jaritz 1991, 185).

The 42-metre long largely unfinished First Eastern Colonnade with 16 columns functions as a common vestibule of the sanctuaries found behind its rear wall (Jaritz 1991, 180), accessible through six doors. One of the chapels was consecrated to the Nubian divinity Mandulis (5), whose cult on Philae is probably mentioned in a Greek inscription of the middle of the second century BC (SB VIII 9737: Locher 1999, 137; Haeny 1985, 222). Behind the north end of the

First Eastern Colonnade back wall, the temple of Imhotep is situated (**6**), dedicated by Ptolemy V, possibly in gratitude for the birth of Ptolemy VI (Lanciers 1986, 97; Arnold 1999, 181).

North of the temple of Imhotep stands the so-called “Gate of Philadelphus” (**7** and fig. 5), which was maybe erected already in the 30th dynasty for the Late Period temple of Isis (Arnold 1999, 119). Later it was decorated by Ptolemy II (and Tiberius) and joined to the Ptolemaic first pylon of Isis (Hölbl 2004, 55, fig. 67).

On the west flank of Philae, one encounters undecorated stone structures of unknown purpose (**8**); moreover, there was a stairway leading to the shore (Arnold 1999, 264). At the height of the pronaos follows the so-called “Gate of Hadrian” (**9** and fig. 6), which is actually a corridor-like passage with decorated side walls, with a now lost columned porch attached to its west exit (Arnold 1999, 264; Haeny 1985, 215-216). It is the latest cultic building on Philae with proper, though not fully completed temple reliefs, datable to between c. 117 and 180 AD (Hadrian, Marc Aurel, and Lucius Verus: Hölbl 2004, 89 and 96). Originally, the Gate was located opposite the mooring chapel on Bigga and served as a departure point for the barque procession of Isis to the tomb of Osiris on the Abaton. Inter alia, it bears the Abaton Decree with regulations concerning the cult of Osiris on Bigga (Junker 1913), and a text recording the donation of a wine yard to the temple of Isis (Junker 1924). A depiction of the god Mandulis is accompanied by the youngest datable hieroglyphic inscription from Egypt (August 24, 394 AD: Hölbl 2004, 96 fig. 129).

In short distance north of the Gate of Hadrian comes the temple of Harendotes (**10** and fig. 7), decorated by Claudius (Arnold 1999, 252; Giammarusti/Roccati 1980, 74). Only the pavement and lowest course of blocks remain (Haeny 1985, 216), many blocks were re-used in the Western Church (see below; Winter 1982, 1023; Winter 1976, 13).

On the east flank of the temple of Isis stands the temple of Hathor (**11** and fig. 8), decorated under Ptolemy VI, and VIII and once with its own mud brick enclosure wall. A block built into walls close to the temple mentions also Ptolemy XII (Hölbl 2004, 43; Winter 1982, 1023; Minas 1997, 108; Morardet 1981; Lepsius(†) 1901, 170γ). The columned vestibule on its west was added under Augustus (Daumas 1968-1969, 1) or earlier, rather than Tiberius (thus Arnold 1999, 248 and 192, fig. 141; Haeny 1985, 230). In mid-first century AD, a quay-platform was annexed on the east side. The cult of the temple focuses on Hathor as the Sun’s Eye brought back from Nubia.

Some 20 metres south is the unfinished “Kiosk of Trajan” (**12** and fig. 9) (“Pharaoh’s Bed”; Lyons 1908, 15), whose south screen walls were decorated with two offering scenes under

this emperor; the actual building may derive from the reign of Augustus (Haeny 1985, 230). Probably, it served as a resting point during processions (Arnold 1999, 235). At the south of the path that linked the kiosk with the Gate of Philadelphus, a small undecorated Roman chapel is found (**13**) (Hölbl 2004, 92, fig. 124).

The north end of the island was occupied by a prostylos temple in classical Graeco-Roman architecture, dedicated to the cult of Augustus (**14** and fig. 10). Built by the prefect Rubrius Barbarus, it was “one of the first Roman-style buildings in the East” (Arnold 1999, 237). Here a trilingual stela of the first praefectus Aegypti Cornelius Gallus was discovered, who defeated a revolt in the Thebais and put the Triakontaschoinos under Rome’s supremacy (edition Hoffmann et al. 2009).

The temple of Augustus is preceded in the east by the Roman-style Gate of Diocletian (**15** and fig. 10) (Arnold 1999, 226; Locher 1999, 132; Dijkstra 2008, 27 with note 126). It was thought to represent the rest of a late Roman fortification, established after Diocletian had abandoned the Dodekaschoinos and moved the frontier to the region of Philae. More likely, it was a freestanding triumphal arch (Haeny 1985, 232).

As the latest antique stone building of the island, two churches were located in the area between the temple of Augustus and the temple of Isis. The Western Church (**16**) was dedicated to Maria (mid-eighth century: Giammarusti/Roccati 1980, 79). The Eastern Church (**17**) might belong to the episcopate of bishop Theodorus (c. 525-577 AD; Grossmann 1970, 41). When the edifices of Philae were moved to Agilkia (see below), the two churches could not be saved. The late antique and Arabic mud brick houses, which covered large parts of the island until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, had already been removed (Lyons 1908, 16) or washed away.

### Early History of Philae

The history of the temples of Philae reaches back to the 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty; a single spoil of Senwosret III (Giammarusti/Roccati 1980, 55 n. 4) and a few re-used Ramesside blocks do not testify to earlier temple building on the island (Farag et al. 1979; Haeny 1985, 200-201).

18 blocks of Taharka, re-employed as filler of the Ptolemaic buildings, stem probably from the first cultic edifice on Philae. Judging from the Kushite spoils, the island was not yet consecrated to the goddess Isis, but maybe to Amun (Arnold 1999, 43; Winter 1982, 1025; Giammarusti/Roccati 1980, 57; Dietze 1994, 68). The earliest attestations of the cult of Isis derive from the 26<sup>th</sup> dynasty. Some 300 re-used blocks of a temple of Amasis were found in the Ptolemaic temple of Isis (Farag et al. 1976; Farid 1980). Apparently, Isis played a major role in the decoration of the Saite edifice. This presumed Late Period forerunner of the

Ptolemaic-Roman temple was probably located in the area of the later second pylon and had only three rooms in one line (Hölbl 2004, 41; Haeny 1985, 202). Another modest Saitic building was the kiosk of Psammetichus II at the west flank of the island. As it is not entirely sure whether the edifice of Taharka was actually erected on Philae or later transferred there as building material, this kiosk is the oldest structure that definitely stood on Philae (Haeny 1985, 202); the inscriptions of the kiosk allude to the Abaton (Kadry 1980; Giammarusti/Roccati 1980, 58). Its erection may relate to Psammetichus' military campaign against the Kushites (Arnold 1999, 76-77); conceivably, Saite troops introduced the cult of Isis on the island, when they restored Egypt's southern frontier (Haeny 1985, 202).

The Philae temples of the 26<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> dynasty were considerably smaller than their Graeco-Roman successors. While the latter and the Abaton are referred to by several classical authors (e.g. Diodorus Siculus I.22 and 27; Strabon XVII.49; Seneca Nat. quaest. IVa,2,7; Plutarch De I. et O., 20), the Saite sanctuary is not mentioned in the fifth century opus of Herodotus, probably because Philae had not yet become an important cult centre (Haeny 1985, 207).

The Graeco-Roman cult of Isis and Osiris on Philae attracted numerous pilgrims and visitors (Cruz-Urbe 2002, 176-177; Rutherford 1998, 230), who left hundreds of proskynemata and other graffiti in Demotic (Griffith 1935-1937), Greek, Latin (Bernand 1969) and Meroitic (Griffith 1912). Certain visitors were of elevated social status, like Hermias, governor of the Thebais (c. 120 BC; Roccati 1981, 329-330, no. 11); apparently, also Ptolemaic kings were among those who travelled to the island (e.g. Bingen 1997, 93-94; Hölbl 1994, 143; Rutherford 1998, 236). In Hellenistic times, devotees came from as far as Greece, Crete and Asia Minor. During the Roman Period, we encounter pilgrims basically from Egypt and Nubia (Hölbl 2004, 51-53; Dijkstra 2008, 186). Noteworthy are the Meroitic delegations, which visited the island regularly in the third century AD (Hölbl 2004, 54 and 89) and donated precious cult objects to the temple. The strong presence of Meroits, who had their own cultic room in the Second Eastern Colonnade (Dijkstra 2008, 135 and 184; Rutherford 1998, 234), was already noted in the late first century BC by Strabon (XVII.49).

From the fourth to sixth century, Christian religion became gradually dominant in Philae and in the region of Assuan as a whole. By the mid-fourth century, Philae had its own bishop (Macedonius, attested in 343 AD); the diocese on the island must have been founded at about the same time. Irrespective of this, traditional Egyptian temples cults did continue for more than another century and were the last Egyptian cults to survive. Priests of Isis left Demotic graffiti as late as the fifth century AD (Griffith 1937, 104-105, no. 370; no. 372) and the cult image of Isis was still worshipped in 451/52 AD, as is proven by an agreement between the

officer Maximinus and the Blemmyers and Noubads. This arrangement guaranteed the Nubian tribes free access to the temple of Isis; moreover, they were granted permission to carry the statue of Isis to their homeland for a period of time, as they used to do before (Cruz-Urbe 2002, 171-172, 181; Rutherford 1998, 234-235). Besides the worship of Isis, other cults subsisted in the fifth century, as for the hybrid deity Ptireus (Hölbl 2004, 60; Dijkstra 2008, 211-213). This long persistency may be ascribed partly to the steady support by the peoples of the south, as Meroites, Blemmyers and Noubades (Dijkstra 2008, 172-173). In the third and fourth centuries AD, Egyptian and Christian religion existed side by side on the island. Later tradition presents their relations as fairly hostile, cf. the Coptic text “Life of Aaron”, preserved in a manuscript of the 10th century, but probably a work of the sixth century. It relates how the aforementioned bishop Macedonius ended the Egyptian cults by killing the last sacred falcon of Philae (Hölbl 2004, 54).

Despite of the edict by Theodosius I that had prohibited traditional cults and subjected their followers to prosecution in 391 AD (resumed by Theodosius II in 438/39 AD; Griffiths 1986; Rutherford 1998, 234), the official end of Egyptian religion on Philae came not before the sixth century AD, when the temple of Isis was closed officially by general Narses on orders of emperor Iustinian (535-537 AD). According to Procopius (Pers. I, 19.31-37), the temples were destroyed, their priests arrested and the cult statues sent to Byzantium. This creates the impression that the Philae cults were still in full sway. As recent research has shown, however, Procopius’ account seems much exaggerated and should be treated as imperial propaganda. Since the last evidence for active traditional officiants on the island dates from 456/57 AD, the organized temple cults are likely to have stopped already in the second half of the fifth century and to have not existed anymore when Narses came to Philae; moreover, the temples of Philae were never destroyed. The closure of the temples under Iustinian can only have been symbolic (Dijkstra 2008, 217).

The pronaos of the abandoned Isis temple was turned into a church of St Stephanos by bishop Theodorus (Hölbl 2004, 69-70; Cruz-Urbe 2002, 183; Hahn 2008, 212; Dijkstra 2008, 41). Obviously this was regarded as a remarkable event, as it is recorded in several inscriptions (Grossmann 1970, 40). Additionally, some of the minor sanctuaries of Philae were transformed into churches (temples of Arensnuphis, Hathor; maybe the temple of Imhotep: Giammarusti/Roccati 1980, 79; Krause 1966, 75; Dijkstra 2008, 322-323 with n. 85).

Modern History of Philae

The first known European visitors to Philae are an anonymous Venetian in 1589 (Winter 1976, 7; Burri et al. 1971, 125-129 and 151) and the French Jesuit Claude Sicard in 1720 (Martin 1982, 88; Dawson/Uphill 1995, 390). With the 18th century (Winter 1974, 229), Philae attracted numberless travellers and researchers. In 1799, the Napoleonic expedition copied reliefs and made a ground plan of the site, succeeded by early Egyptologists like Rossellini, Champollion (Winter 1974, 230), Lepsius (Lepsius 1852, 107-111, 262-264), draughtsmen like David Roberts (Guiterman 1978, 9) and Robert Hay (Winter 1974, 230), as well as renowned mid-19<sup>th</sup> century photographers like Francis Frith and Maxime du Camp (Grimm 1980, 95-105).

In connection with the construction of the Old Assuan dam, the temples were surveyed and thoroughly examined by the British army officer Henry George Lyons (1895-96 and first years of the 20th century). In the same years, the Italian technician Alexandre Barsanti restored and consolidated the buildings, as they were to be affected by flooding. Two photographic missions of the Prussian Academy of Sciences, Berlin, documented a great number of reliefs and inscriptions in 1908/09 and 1909/10 (1600 photographs and thousands of paper squeezes: Winter 1974, 230-231; id., 1976, 10).

In an UNESCO rescue campaign from 1972 to 1980, almost all antique buildings of Philae were transferred by an Italian-Egyptian mission several hundred metres to the north-west and re-erected on the island of Agilkia, whose ground level is 13 metres higher than that of ancient Philae (Winter 1976, 11 and 15 note 11). For dismantling the edifices, the south and middle part of the already submerged island was encircled by a sand-filled cofferdam covering an area of c. 35000 square metres (Giammarusti/Roccati 1980, 38-53). The deconstruction of Philae offered new insights in the history of the island and its buildings.

#### Bibliographic Notes

A scholarly overall monograph on Philae, its temples and history is still missing; popular accounts with numerous illustrations were published by Sauneron/Stierlin (1975) and Giammarusti/Roccati (1980). Basic facts on the temples are readily available from Arnold (1992). A much richer source of detailed information is the survey by Hölbl (2004), which also abundantly provides brilliant photographs.

An article by Winter (1982), on which the present contribution is partly modelled, gives a good short overview on the history of the site and its monuments. The archaeological development of the island was summarized in the excellent contribution by Haeny (1985), which also includes valuable illustrations of how the temple complex looked like at different

stages (Saitic time; Early, Middle and Late Ptolemaic era; Roman times). Lyon's "Reports" on Philae (1896 and 1908) are still of great value today for their photographs, accurate technical descriptions, maps, plans, soundings of the foundations, and sectional drawings.

A substantial bulk of texts and reliefs were copied and edited by Georges Bénédict, who published the decoration of the naos in 1893 and 1895; his work is still of importance, although it contains numerous inaccuracies. For a proper and accurate edition of the inscriptions according to modern standards, the "Philä"-series was initiated by Hermann Junker in the late 1950ies, with support by and on behalf of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna (Winter 1974, 234). Currently, this project is being continued by Erich Winter, with collaboration of the present author. Two volumes with reproductions of the scenes and translations have been published (Junker 1958; Junker(†)/Winter 1965), a third one is in preparation. An exhaustive overview of various published single texts is given by Winter (1974). To this may be added some later edited hymns from the temples on Philae, translated and commented by Žabkar (1981, 1988, 1992), whose renderings need to be revised in various instances, however. The many Philae inscriptions that contain allusions to the Myth of the Sun's Eye have been collected and discussed by Iconnu-Bocquillon. The rich corpus of Demotic, Greek, Latin, and Meroitic graffiti has been published in 1912, the 1930ies and 1960ies (Griffith 1912, 1935-1937; Bernand 1969). The iconography of the reliefs was examined in an art historical study by Vassilika (1989). A reconstruction of the colouration of the temple reliefs of Philae, which was still well preserved at the time of the Napoleonic Expedition, is being prepared by Beinlich and Fuchs (2009).

The slow transition of Philae from a place of Egyptian religion to Christianity is depicted in the fascinating and well written book by Dijkstra (2008).

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