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News & Notes

The Oriental Institute

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UNESCO/A. Vorontzoff and G. Bola

At sunrise on March 10, in the colonnaded courtyard of the Temple of Isis, 1,000 gathered to inaugurate the opening of the "Pearl of the Nile", the graceful collection of ancient Egyptian and Graeco-Roman buildings reconstructed on Agilkia island in the Nile near Aswan. The dams, built in 1902 and in 1970, caused serious inundation problems for the sacred island of Philae. The monuments had to be dismantled, transported 300 metres down the Nile, and re-erected on Agilkia. First, this island had to be tailored to receive the monuments by having its contours remodeled, and landscaped so that the temples could be placed in their same orientation to the sun.

The inaugural celebration, which was organized under the patronage of President El Sadat, marked the end of a successful twenty-year campaign by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to save the monuments in Egypt and the Sudan from flooding. Twenty-six countries contributed to the campaign, as did many private foundations, institutions, and universities from throughout the world. The Oriental Institute participated with its expeditions and with scholarly talent from its faculty:

Dr. John A. Wilson, late director of the Institute, served many years on the International Committee to Save the Nubian Monuments. A large field program was implemented by Prof. Keith C. Seele for the Institute's Nubian campaign. He served as director of this field program for three years, except during his illness one season when he was relieved by Dr. George R. Hughes, former director of the Institute, who at that time was director of Chicago House in Luxor. Dr. Louis V. Zabkar, research associate for the Institute, spent many summers copying inscriptions while the monuments were still *in situ*. The hot summer months were the only time work could go on because that was the period when the inundation receded.

PHILAE RESURRECTED

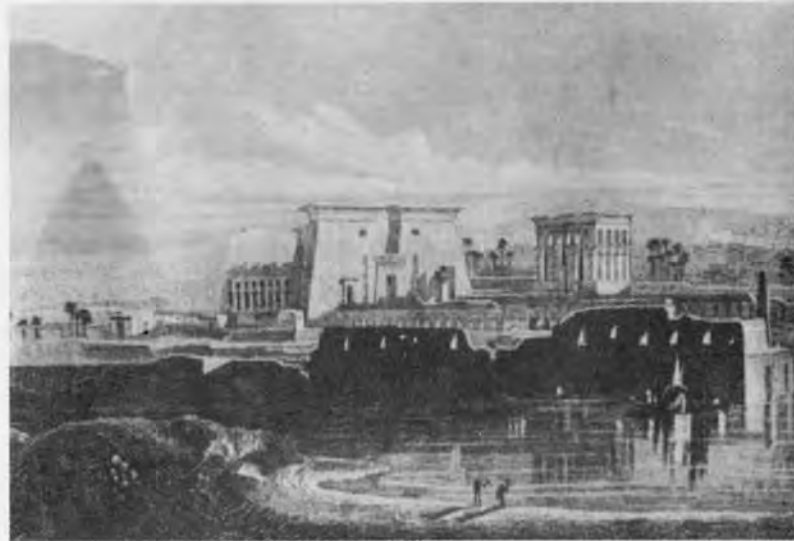


Photo Alexis Vorontzoff, Unesco

Engraving above shows the island as it was in the Mid-19th century, high and dry above the Nile, its temples virtually unchanged since Antiquity. Photo below was taken after the lake was formed behind the 1902 dam and shortly after the sluice gates had been closed, and the waters were starting to rise. (From the Unesco-Courier Feb./March 1980).

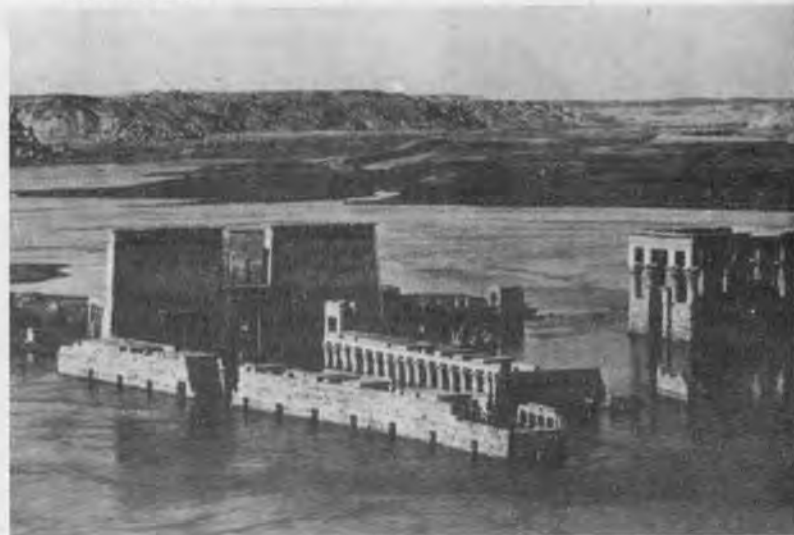


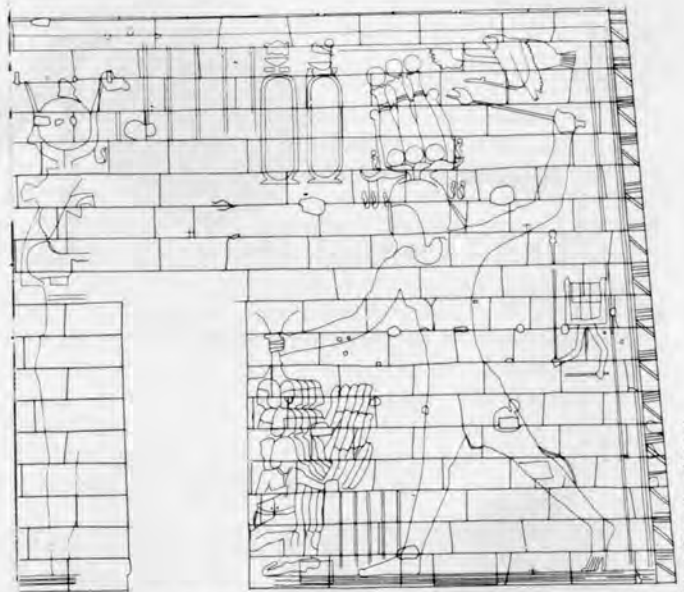
Photo Georg Gerster © Rapho, Paris

Philae was always famed for its beauty. In 1874, Amelia Edwards, who later endowed the chair of Egyptology in London's University College, commented: "As seen from the level of a small boat, the island with its palms, the colonnades, its pylons, seems to rise out of the river like a mirage." This island, only about 500 yards long by 160 yards broad, occupies a very special niche in the historical panorama of the Two Lands, because it was destined to become the last stronghold of the polytheistic priesthood that had presided over the destiny of Egypt for more than thirty-five centuries.

The rich pattern of monuments in varying styles also makes the island unique. The earliest monuments date from the sixth century B.C.; the main temple of Philae, dedicated to Isis—the ancient Egyptian goddess of fertility, love and devotion—dates from the third century B.C.; the Temple of Hathor, the last Ptolemaic monument, was completed before 116 B.C. Furthermore, there are additions to the monuments by the Roman emperors, as well as traces of the Christian and Muslim influences.

When, with the death of Cleopatra, Egypt became a province of Rome, the Romans accepted the pantheon of Egyptian gods and in particular, they embraced the cult of Isis, which by then was centered in Philae. More endowments were made and more temples and shrines were built by emperors such as Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, Trajan, Hadrian and Diocletian. With the passing of the centuries, however, the political influence of the priesthood brought increasing embarrassment to the occupying power.

With the conversion of Rome to Christianity, the sign of the Cross swiftly spread along the length of the Nile until it reached the first cataract in Aswan. But it was not until A.D. 550, under Justinian, that Christianity came to Philae, and a new chapter in the island's story began: A Christian community was established around the Temple of Isis, and the hypostyle hall was converted for Christian worship. Blocks were removed from some of the monuments to build Coptic churches on the island. Later on, Muslims also left their traces and many stelae with Arabic inscriptions have been found there. Fortunately, the Great Temple was spared much structural damage during all these years of change, and its original inscriptions have been largely preserved. One of them provided a clue to a name on the Rosetta Stone, which led to the decipherment of the ancient hieroglyphic script. Under Islam, Philae came to be regarded as a legendary fortress, figuring in one of the stories of *Thousand and One Nights* and acquiring the name of *Anas el Wugud* after the tale's hero.



Institut Géographique National

Before they were dismantled, the carved stones of Philae were charted in a photogrammetric survey by the Institut Géographique National, France; this detail is from the first pylon of the Great Temple.

And as late as 1799, Napoleon's expedition carved an inscription. Thus, Philae bears traces of all the different cultures which flowed through it!

In our century, "the pearl of the Nile" vanished except for a few months of summer. After the building of the first Aswan Dam in 1902, the level of the lake was successively raised until the monuments were covered up to the tips of the two pylons of the temple of Isis for ten months of the year, and the palms and flowering shrubs which had so set off Philae's architecture were swallowed in river mud. Despite this, the island did not die. Its monuments had been carefully surveyed and their foundations strengthened before the floods arrived, and the buildings were regularly maintained by the Egyptian Antiquities Service in the summer months. While the waters removed the colored decorations from the walls, they also washed out the rising salts which so often threaten to crumble old buildings into rubble.

It was the building of the High Dam which radically changed the situation. Lying between the old and new dams, the island would be only partially submerged, but all the year round. Furthermore, the daily drawing off of water to drive electricity-generating turbines would mean a constant fluctuation of some three metres in the water level, bringing with it



37,363 separate blocks were shipped to the bank and kept in storage while Agilkia was made ready to receive them.

Condotta-Mazzi Estero, Rome

rapid deterioration of the stone. Unless a solution were found, the floating island would be wiped from the map.

A number of possible solutions included damming off the surrounding water to give Philae its own lake at a lower level than the reservoir; the building of a water-tight barrier directly around the island; or the dismantling and re-erection of the monuments on Philae after raising the surface. The solution finally adopted was to transfer the temples to the higher-lying island of Agilkia.

It took nearly five years of blasting and bull-dozing to remodel Agilkia into the characteristic dove-like shape of Philae. Some 13,000 square metres were added to Agilkia's coastline and the highest points of the island were reduced by 30 metres. Salvage of Philae was a meticulous operation, carefully checked at every stage. It began in 1972 when a coffer dam of 3,000 interlocking steel sheet piles was constructed around the island. Then it was drained by batteries of pumps, and hundreds of workmen were called in to carry away the mud and silt left by 70 years of submersion. The monuments were cleaned, photogrammetric recordings made of their richly ornamented surfaces, and every element was numbered before it was dismantled and shipped away. Altogether 37,363 separate blocks were lifted by crane, labelled,

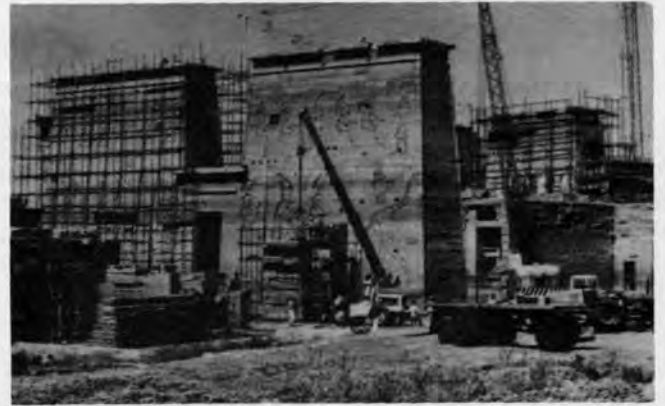


Inscriptions on the temple of Isis. (Unesco/Alexis Vorontzoff.)

catalogued and ferried by barge to a storage area on the banks of the Nile to await the transformation of Agilkia. Re-erecting all the monuments on their new site took two years, and the last stage of the undertaking began in 1979 with the landscaping of Agilkia with trees and shrubs to give back to Philae's monuments their relationship with natural vegetation, water and sky.

Now that all is done, many of the buildings are more complete and more firmly established than they have been for centuries. Apart from the physical success of this effort, the campaign has opened up a new field of scholarship which will throw light on the historical origins and development of African cultures in the middle Nile. To quote Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, director-general of UNESCO: "The story of mankind begins to unfold from the moment that men's memories, their hopes and doubts, take shape in stone or find expression in a mask or a musical rhythm. In defiance of death the message is passed down from generation to generation, spinning the long thread of historical continuity that enables nations to perpetuate their collective identity in the face of change. . . . Indeed, our generation is the first in history to perceive the totality of these works as an indivisible whole, each of them being considered as an integral part of a single universal heritage. . . ."

—Elda Maynard



After its rescue, the Temple of Isis rises from a sea of mud. Photos: A. Vorontzoff and G. Bola (Unesco).

RARE FRAGMENT DISPLAYED



The Museum of The Oriental Institute has on public view for the first time, the oldest known fragment of the famous tales of 1,001 Nights—600 years older than any other known text of the tales. Several torn, discolored pieces of what appear to be ancient scrap paper are the oldest surviving example of the use of paper for a literary manuscript outside of China; and the displayed fragment is the oldest known example of a paper book in the Western world.

The Oriental Institute acquired in 1947, this fragment as one of only six paper documents out of a collection of over 300 parchment documents from Egypt, which had been produced in Syria in the first quarter of the ninth century. The tales had originated in the Parthian Empire of Persia (248 B.C.—226 A.D.), were translated and adapted by the

Arab world, and became a casualty of the 877-78 war between Syria and Egypt, when they were transported from Syria to Egypt by the victorious Turkish army.

Professor Nabia Abbott of The Oriental Institute determined in 1949, the order of the various and copious additions to the available space on the now priceless pages by the styles of handwriting, the inks used, and the space appropriated for each entry. While these idle scribbings defaced the pages, they also allowed scholars to trace the history of the fragment.

Although the Chinese invented paper in the first century, the Islamic world did not learn the procedure for making paper until 751 A.D., when some Chinese captives in Samarkand were forced by their Arab captors to divulge the secret of making paper. The fragment itself is made of linen using techniques revealed by the Chinese.

From the Membership Office:

Watch for announcements of coming lectures in conjunction with the recently opened exhibit of The Oriental Institute excavations at ancient Carthage. First lecture was given to an audience with standing room only in Breasted Hall.

To arrange dates for a second course with Frank Yurco on Egyptian Hieroglyphs on Saturday mornings during the summer at The Oriental Institute, please write or telephone:

Membership Office
The Oriental Institute
1155 East 58th Street
Chicago, Illinois 60637
Telephone: (312) 753-2389

Pre-requisite: Introductory course either at The Oriental Institute or at the Field Museum.



The Oriental Institute

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