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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### PART I: ARCHAEOLOGY

J.R. ANDERSON and SALAH ELDIN MOHAMED AHMED Five Years of Excavations at Dangeil, Sudan: A New Amun Temple of the Late Kushite Period. . . . .	3
M.-P. AUBRY, W.A. BERGGREN, C. DUPUIS, E. POORVIN, H. GHALY, D. WARD, C. KING, R. O'BRIAN KNOX, Kh. OUDA and W. FATHY HASSAN TIGA: A Geoarchaeologic Project in the Theban Necropolis, West Bank, Egypt . . . . .	21
B. BADER A Late Middle Kingdom Settlement at Tell el-Dab'a and its Potential . . .	45
G. BAKOWSKA Meroitic Pottery from Napata. The Hellenistic Influence . . . . .	65
H. BARNARD The Study of Eastern Desert Ware . . . . .	77
N. BILLING and J.M. ROWLAND Recently Discovered Blocks in the Central Delta Village of Kom el-Ahmar, Minuf . . . . .	101
J. BUDKA The Asasif Revisited: New Results from the Austrian Concession . . . . .	111
J. BUDKA Festival Pottery of the New Kingdom: The Case of Elephantine . . . . .	131
N. CASTELLANO Les nécropoles d'Oxyrhynchos. . . . .	147
R. CZERNER Architecture of the Temple of Tuthmosis III at Deir el-Bahari. Some Remarks on the Hypostyle Hall: Study on Architectural Elements of the Roof Structure . . . . .	159
Z. DE KOONING Preliminary Report on the Ceramological Corpus of the Survey in al-Shaykh Sa'id South . . . . .	175

C. FANTAOUTSAKI	
New Evidence on the Sanctuary of Isis in the Ancient City of Rhodes . . .	189
J.M. GALÁN	
Excavations at the Courtyard of the Tomb of Djehuty (TT 11) . . . . .	207
Z. HAWASS	
The Egyptian Expedition in the Valley of the Kings Excavation Season 2, 2008-2009: Part 1 . . . . .	221
I. INCORDINO	
Royal Monuments of the Third Dynasty: A Re-examination of the Archae- ological Documents . . . . .	267
M. JONES	
The Temple Palace of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu: An Archaeological Approach to its Preservation . . . . .	277
A.A. KROL	
“White Walls” of Memphis at Kom Tuman . . . . .	295
M.J. LÓPEZ-GRANDE and E. DE GREGORIO	
Pottery Vases from a Deposit with Flower Bouquets Found at Dra Abu el-Naga . . . . .	305
M.H. TRINDADE LOPES and T.R. PEREIRA	
The Palace of Apries (Memphis/Kôm Tumân): Brief Report of the Fifth Campaign (April 2008) . . . . .	319
S.T. BASILICO and S.A. LUPO	
Function of Area II in Tell el-Ghaba, North Sinai, through its Pottery Evi- dence . . . . .	327
M. MÜLLER	
Kalksteinpuzzle in Per-Ramses . . . . .	341
M. MASCORT	
L’Osireion d’Oxyrhynchos . . . . .	365
A. NIWIŃSKI	
A Mysterious Tomb at Deir el-Bahari. Revelations of the Excavations of the Polish-Egyptian Cliff Mission above the Temples of Hatshepsut and Thutmosis III . . . . .	377
M.C. PÉREZ DIE	
Ehnasya el Medina (Herakleopolis Magna). Excavations 2004-2007 at the Necropolis of the First Intermediate Period / Early Middle Kingdom . . . .	393

E. PONS MELLADO	
Saite Tomb n° 14 at the Archaeological Site of Oxyrhynchus (el Bahnasa)	411
C. PRICE	
East of Djoser: Preliminary Report of the Saqqara Geophysical Survey Project, 2007 Season . . . . .	421
R. SCHIESTL	
Locating the Cemeteries of the Residential Elite of the Thirteenth Dynasty at Dahshur . . . . .	429
F. SCHMITT	
La semence des pierres: le dépôt de fondation dans l'Égypte ancienne . . .	443
N. SHIRAI, W. WENDRICH and R. CAPPERS	
An Archaeological Survey in the Northeastern Part of the Fayum . . . . .	459
Z.E. SZAFRAŃSKI	
King Hatshepsut from the Deir el-Bahari Temple . . . . .	475
P. VERLINDEN	
“Tombs for the Tombless”: A Study of Children and Burial Space in the Dakhla Oasis . . . . .	487
G. VÖRÖS	
Egyptian Temple Architecture in the Light of the Hungarian Excavations in Egypt (1907-2007) . . . . .	501
A. WODZIŃSKA	
Tell er-Retaba: Ceramic Survey 2007 . . . . .	521
S. YOSHIMURA and M. BABA	
Recent Discoveries of Intact Tombs at Dahshur North: Burial Customs of the Middle and New Kingdoms . . . . .	545
C.S. ZEREFOS, S.N. AMBRAZEYS, H. BADAWY and E. XIROTYRI-ZEREFOS	
Past and Present Geophysical Threats at the Great City of Alexandria . . .	557
C. ZIEGLER	
Nouvelles découvertes à Saqqara . . . . .	569

## PART II: ROYAL IDEOLOGY AND SOCIETY

S. AGAPOV	
Soziale Strukturen und wirtschaftliche Aktivitäten in Gebelein zur Zeit der 4.-5. Dynastie (nach Angaben der Gebelein-Papyri) . . . . .	583

S. ALLAM	
A Field for Interdisciplinary Research . . . . .	595
S. CARMELLO	
Aramaic-Speaking People in Egypt: Religion and Ethnicity. . . . .	605
J. CASHMAN	
The Scribal Palette as an Elite Gift in New Kingdom Egypt . . . . .	615
G. CAVILLIER	
From the Mediterranean Sea to the Nile: New Perspectives and Researches on the Sherden in Egypt . . . . .	631
G. CRISCENZO-LAYCOCK	
The Nome: Naturally Occuring Local Unit, or Artificial Device of the State? A Case Study of the Fourteenth Upper Egyptian Nome . . . . .	639
A.J. DE WIT	
Enemies of the State: Perceptions of “Otherness” and State Formation in Egypt . . . . .	649
H. DIAZ RIVAS	
Widowhood in Ancient Egypt. . . . .	669
Sh. EL-MENSHAWY	
Aspects of the Office of Temple Gardener in Ancient Egypt (Reconsid- eration of the Recently Published Stela TN. 20.3.25.3). . . . .	679
A. EL SHAHAWAY	
Les «individus» qui établissent l’ordre cosmique: un aspect de la dévolution de prérogatives royales dans les tombes thébaines du Nouvel Empire . . . .	693
C.J. EYRE	
Economy and Society in Pharaonic Egypt . . . . .	707
M. FAROUK	
A Timeline of the Old Kingdom Officials . . . . .	727
M. GATHY	
La peinture thébaine sous le règne d’Amenhotep II: étude d’une création artistique comme reflet du contexte historique et socioculturel de l’époque	741
B. HAYDEN	
Demotic “Marriage Documents” as Evidence for the Perception and Use of Coinage among Egyptians in the Ptolemaic Period. . . . .	751
K.A. KÓTHAY	
Duties and Composition of the Personnel of the Cults at Lahun. . . . .	763

M. LIANO	
The Foundations of Royal Military Power in Early Ptolemaic Egypt. . . . .	777
G. MENÉNDEZ	
Foreigners in Deir el-Medina during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties	791
J. MOJE	
The Demotic Tomb Stelae from Dandara. . . . .	805
M. MINAS-NERPEL	
Ptolemaic Queens in Egyptian Temple Reliefs: Intercultural Reflections of Political Authority, or Religious Imperatives? . . . . .	809
M. NUZZOLO	
Sun Temples and Pyramid Texts: The King's Progress in the Evolution of his Cult . . . . .	823
M. ORRIOLS-LLONCH	
Semen Ingestion and Oral Sex in Ancient Egyptian Texts . . . . .	839
F. PAYRAUDEAU	
La situation politique de Tanis sous la XXV <sup>ème</sup> dynastie . . . . .	849
D. STEFANOVIĆ	
The <i>ḥkrt-nswt</i> on the Monuments of the <i>ʒtḳ n tt ḥkʒ</i> . . . . .	861
D. SWEENEY	
Masculinity, Femininity and the Spirituality of Work at Deir el-Medīna . .	873
K. SZPAKOWSKA	
Infancy in a Rural Community: A Case Study of Early Childhood at Lahun	885
A. VON LIEVEN	
Who was “King” (S)asychis? . . . . .	899
A.P. ZINGARELLI	
Comments on the Egyptian Term <i>wḥyt</i> : Family or Quasi-Village? . . . . .	909

## PART III: BELIEF SYSTEM AND RITUAL

B. ARQUIER	
Décans nocturnes et décans diurnes . . . . .	923
J. ASSMANN	
The “Structure” of Ancient Egyptian Religion . . . . .	935

J.A. BELMONTE, M. SHALTOUT and M. FEKRI Astronomy and Landscape in Ancient Egypt. Temple Alignments and Implications for Chronology . . . . .	951
R. BUSSMANN Changing Cultural Paradigms: From Tomb to Temple in the Eleventh Dynasty . . . . .	971
E. CONSTAS Une lecture de la façade du tombeau de Petosiris. Les piliers d'ante: approche sémiologique . . . . .	987
D. CZERWIK The Afterlife Beliefs in the Sixth-Dynasty Private Inscriptions . . . . .	1003
M. DOLINSKA The Bird at the Back of the Atef Crown . . . . .	1017
K. LAHN DUMKE Some Reflections on the Function of a Particular Triad Constellation in New Kingdom Religious Iconography . . . . .	1041
Kh. ELGAWADY Die Schranken in den ägyptischen Tempeln der griechisch-römischen Zeit . . . . .	1053
A. EL-TAYEB SAYED Coffin Texts Spell 823 and the Rites of Passage: The Archaeological Context of the Coffin of Mentuhotep . . . . .	1073
F. FEDER Egyptian Mortuary Liturgies in the Papyri of the Ptolemaic Period . . . . .	1083
A. GABER Some Snake Deities from the Temple of Edfu . . . . .	1093
K. GRIFFIN Links between the <i>rekhyt</i> and Doorways in Ancient Egypt . . . . .	1115
N. GUILHOU La constellation de la tortue: proposition d'identification . . . . .	1131
S. TOWER HOLLIS Hathor, Mistress of Byblos . . . . .	1143
L.J. KINNEY The ( <i>w</i> ) <i>nwn</i> Funerary Dance in the Old Kingdom and its Relationship to the Dance of the <i>mww</i> . . . . .	1153



Y. KOENIG	
The Papyrus of the Seven Utterances of the Goddess Mehet Weret. . . . .	1167
L. DÍAZ-IGLESIAS LLANOS	
The Role of Osiris in the Mythological Cycle Devised around Heracleopolis Magna and its Territory. . . . .	1173
R. LUCARELLI	
Ancient Egyptian Demons: The Evidence of the Magical and Funerary Papyri of the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period. . . . .	1187
L. MARTZOLFF	
L'adaptation d'un rituel sur les murs d'un temple à la période tardive: l'exemple du rituel divin journalier . . . . .	1195
A. PRIES	
Standard Rituals in Change – Patterns of Tradition from the Pyramid Texts to Roman Times . . . . .	1211
G. SCHREIBER	
Crocodile Gods on a Late Group of Hypocephali . . . . .	1225
J.M. SERRANO	
Nouvelles données concernant le rituel de l'Ouverture de la Bouche: la tombe de Djehouty (TT 11) . . . . .	1237
R. SOUSA and T. CANHÃO	
Some Notes on Sinuhe's Flight: The Heart as a God's Voice . . . . .	1247
C. WADE	
Sarcophagus Circle: The Goddesses in the Tomb . . . . .	1259
D.A. WARBURTON	
The New Kingdom Solar Theology in Scandinavia? . . . . .	1271
A. WÜTHRICH	
Un exemple de l'évolution des concepts funéraires à la Troisième Période Intermédiaire: le chapitre 166 <sup>PLEYTE</sup> du Livre des Morts. . . . .	1281

## PART IV: LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND EPIGRAPHY

E.M. CIAMPINI, F. CONTARDI and G. ROSATI	
Hathor Temple Project: The Epigraphic Survey at Philae (2006). . . . .	1293
D. CILLI	
Funny Signs, a New Perspective. . . . .	1307

M. DESSOLES et V. EUVERTE	
Projet Rosette: une assistance informatique pour l'étudiant, l'épigraphiste et le philologue . . . . .	1317
C. DI BIASE-DYSON	
Two Characters in Search of an Ending: The Case of Apophis and Seqenenre	1323
B. EGEDI	
Greek Loanwords and Two Grammatical Features of Pre-Coptic Egyptian	1333
J. GEE	
Textual Criticism and Textual Corruption in Coffin Texts 131-142. . . . .	1345
T. GILLEN	
Thematic Analysis and the Third Person Plural Suffix Pronoun in the Medinet Habu Historical Inscriptions. . . . .	1351
R. JASNOW	
"From Alexandria to Rakotis". Progress, Prospects and Problems in the Study of Greco-Egyptian Literary Interaction . . . . .	1363
F. KAMMERZELL	
Egyptian Verb Classifiers . . . . .	1395
R. LANDGRÁFOVÁ and H. NAVRÁTILOVÁ	
Texts from the Period of Crisis. A Database of the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom Biographical Texts. . . . .	1417
E.-S. LINCKE	
The "Determinative" is Prescribed and Yet Chosen. A Systematic View on Egyptian Classifiers . . . . .	1425
M.Á. MOLINERO POLO	
L'identification des <i>Textes des Pyramides</i> des tombes de Haroua (TT 37) et de Pabasa (TT 279). . . . .	1435
L.D. MORENZ	
Kultursemiotik der Alphabetschrift. Ein mentalitätsgeschichtlicher Rekon- struktionsversuch. . . . .	1447
K. MUHLESTEIN	
Those Who Speak Rebellion: Refining our Understanding of the Words Used to Describe "Rebellion" . . . . .	1473
F. NAETHER	
Magic in the Internet: Investigation by Genre in Trismegistos. . . . .	1485

J.R. PÉREZ-ACCINO	
Who is the Sage Talking about? Neferty and the Egyptian Sense of History	1495
S. POLIS and J. WINAND	
Structuring the Lexicon. . . . .	1503
J. WINAND, S. POLIS and S. ROSMORDUC	
<i>Ramses</i> : An Annotated Corpus of Late Egyptian . . . . .	1513
V. RITTER	
La littérature sapientiale du Nouvel Empire. Un état de la question. . . . .	1523
A. ROCCATI	
Alien Speech: Some Remarks on the Language of the Kehek . . . . .	1531
H. SATZINGER	
What Happened to the Voiced Consonants of Egyptian? . . . . .	1537
I. CORDÓN SOLÀ-SAGALÉS	
Four <i>Daughters of the King</i> from the Second Dynasty: Epigraphic and Iconographic Analysis of the Stelae of Hepetkhenmet, Satba, Shepsetipet (?) and Sehefner . . . . .	1547
J. STAUDER-PORCHET	
Relations between Verbs and Simple Prepositions in Earlier Egyptian . . .	1559
U. VERHOEVEN	
Literarische Graffiti in Grab N13.1 in Assiut/Mittelägypten. . . . .	1569
K. VÉRTES	
Ten Years' Epigraphy in Theban Tomb 65. Documentation of the Late Twentieth Dynasty Wall Paintings in the Tomb of Imiseba . . . . .	1577

## PART V: ART AND VITREOUS MATERIAL

K.E. BANDY	
Scenes of Fish and Fishing in Middle Egypt: An Examination of Artistic Continuity and Change . . . . .	1589
E. BERNHAUER	
Zyperns Hathorkapitelle aus altägyptischer Sicht . . . . .	1603
M. CASANOVA, G. PIERRAT-BONNEFOIS, P. QUENET, V. DANREY and D. LACAMBRE	
Lapis Lazuli in the Tôd Treasure: A New Investigation. . . . .	1619

S. EINAUDI	
Le Livre des Morts dans la cour de la tombe d'Haroua (TT 37): nouvelles découvertes . . . . .	1641
L. EVANS	
Animal Behaviour in Egyptian Art: A Brief Overview . . . . .	1653
S. GRALLERT	
Integrated Sets of Model Vessels in Late Period Burials from Lower Egypt. A Preliminary Report . . . . .	1667
M.C. GUIDOTTI	
Essai de classification de la céramique d'Antinoopolis . . . . .	1681
A. MILWARD JONES	
Faience Bowls of the Late New Kingdom . . . . .	1693
T. KIKUCHI	
The Decoration Program in the Burial Chamber of the Royal Tomb of Amenophis III . . . . .	1709
É. LIPTAY	
Panther-Head on the Cloak . . . . .	1719
N.C. MCCREESH, A.P. GIZE and A.R. DAVID	
Pitch Black: The Black Coated Mummies, Coffins and Cartonnages from Ancient Egypt . . . . .	1731
S. MEDEKSZA, R. CZERNER and G. BĄKOWSKA	
Forms and Decoration of Graeco-Roman Houses from Marina el-Alamein	1739
P.T. NICHOLSON	
Glass and Vitreous Materials at Tell el-Amarna . . . . .	1759
M. PANAGIOTAKI, M. TITE and Y. MANIATIS	
Egyptian Blue in Egypt and Beyond: The Aegean and the Near East . . . .	1769
G. PIEKE	
Principles of Decoration: Concept and Style in the Mastaba of Mereruka at Saqqara . . . . .	1791
C. RAEDLER	
Potsherd Scrapers and their Function at the Workshops of the Residence at Piramesse . . . . .	1807
J. REVEZ	
Déconstruction intellectuelle et restitution monumentale: le temple d'Amon-Rê de Karnak comme laboratoire d'idées . . . . .	1819

G. ROBINS	
The Flying Pintail Duck . . . . .	1833
N. STARING	
Contextualizing Old Kingdom Elite Tomb Decoration: Fixed Rules versus Personal Choice . . . . .	1839
I. STÜNKEL	
Analysing CT-Scans of a Mummy: The Amulets of Nesmin . . . . .	1849
G.J. TASSIE	
“‘I’m Osiris, No I’m Osiris, No I’m Osiris”’: Hairstyles and the Afterlife .	1873
A. WOODS	
Five Significant Features in Old Kingdom Spear-Fishing and Fowling Scenes . . . . .	1897
G. XEKALAKI	
The Royal Children as Signs: Reading New Kingdom Princely Iconography	1911

## PART VI: EGYPT AND THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD

A. ALTMAN	
Was Ugarit ever Subordinated to the Eighteenth Dynasty Pharaohs?. . . . .	1925
N.D. AYERS	
Egyptian Imitation of Mycenaean Pottery . . . . .	1935
K. BLOUIN	
Mendès et les reines: reconsidération historique des mosaïques navales de Thmouis (Alexandrie 21739 et 21736). . . . .	1951
P.A. BUTZ	
Egyptian Stylistic Influence on Stoichedon and the Hekatompedon Inscrip- tion at Athens . . . . .	1961
L. HAGUET	
Ceci n’est pas l’Égypte: toponymes, monuments et mythes grecs en Égypte dans la cartographie occidentale entre les XVI <sup>e</sup> et XVIII <sup>e</sup> siècles. . . . .	1975
A. HASSLER	
Mycenaean Pottery in Egypt Reconsidered: Old Contexts and New Results	1989
I. HEIN	
Cypriot and Aegean Features in New Kingdom Egypt: Cultural Elements Interpreted from Archaeological Finds . . . . .	1999

F. HÖFLMAYER and A. ZDIARSKY	
Synchronising Egypt and the Aegean: A Radiocarbon-Based Approach . .	2015
S. ISKANDER	
Merenptah and the Sea Peoples: A New Perspective . . . . .	2035
N. LAZARIDIS	
A Description of the Project “Wisdom Sayings in Ancient Egyptian and Greek Literature” and its Significance as a Comparative Study . . . . .	2047
R. MÜLLER-WOLLERMANN	
Ägypten in Iran . . . . .	2051
J. PHILLIPS	
Egyptian Amethyst in Mycenaean Greece . . . . .	2057
J.-L. PODVIN	
Lampes à décor isiaque du littoral égéen d’Asie mineure . . . . .	2071
T. POMMERENING	
Milch einer Frau, die einen Knaben geboren hat . . . . .	2083
O.A. VASILYEVA	
“Lost Child” of Isis: Towards the Problem of the <i>Interpretatio Graeca</i> of the Osirian Myth in Texts of Later Antique and Christian Authors . . . . .	2097

#### PART VII: CULTURAL HERITAGE AND MUSEOLOGY

A. AMENTA	
The Vatican Mummy Project. A Preliminary Report on the Restoration of the Mummy of Ny-Maat-Re (MV 25011.6.1) . . . . .	2107
G. ANDREU	
News from the Louvre Museum . . . . .	2119
M. HANNA and M. BETRÒ	
Exploring 3D Mapping Applications for the Risk Assessment and Monitoring of Mural Paintings in Theban Tomb 14 . . . . .	2127
J.-L. BOVOT	
Le catalogue des chaouabtis du Louvre: réflexions sur une publication. . .	2137
V.I. CHRYSIKOPOULOS	
À l’aube de l’égyptologie hellénique et de la constitution des collections égyptiennes: des nouvelles découvertes sur Giovanni d’Anastasi et Tassos Néroutsos . . . . .	2147

E. DAVID	
A Louvre Museum Project: The Prosopographical Index of Monuments of the Egyptian Department and its Publication . . . . .	2163
C. DE SIMONE	
A Memorandum of Understanding between Egypt and Sudan in the Field of Cultural Heritage. . . . .	2167
A. DODSON	
The Egyptian Coffins in the Collection of Bristol's City Museum and Art Gallery . . . . .	2171
K. EXELL	
Innovation and Reaction: A Discussion of the Proposed Re-display of the Egyptian Galleries at the Manchester Museum (UK) in the Context of Consultative Curatorial Practice . . . . .	2187
M. HELMY	
Hidden Histories Project at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology .	2199
M. TRAPANI	
Kha's Funerary Equipment at the Egyptian Museum in Turin: Resumption of the Archaeological Study . . . . .	2217
W. WENDRICH, J. DIELEMAN and E. WARAKSA	
Ideas Concerning a New Egyptological Knowledge Base: The UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology (UEE) . . . . .	2233

HATHOR TEMPLE PROJECT:  
THE EPIGRAPHIC SURVEY AT PHILAE (2006)

Emanuele M. CIAMPINI  
(University “Ca’ Foscari”, Venice)

Federico CONTARDI  
(University “La Sapienza”, Rome)

Gloria ROSATI  
(University of Florence)

**Introduction** (Gloria ROSATI)

In the year 2006 our team, directed by Prof. Alessandro Roccati (Chair of Egyptology at the University of Turin) started epigraphic research at the Temple of Hathor on the (new) Philae Island. The main object of our re-examination was the western forecourt of the temple, added to the Ptolemaic building under Emperor Augustus at the very beginning of Roman rule in Egypt<sup>1</sup>.

The structure was integrated into the existing building, both from the architectural point of view and in respect to the subject matter of its decoration. But it is also a peculiar unity, whose reconstruction was undertaken more than one century ago by a legendary Royal Engineer, Captain Henry George Lyons<sup>2</sup>, and a tireless archaeologist, Alexandre Barsanti, born in Alexandria but of Italian origin<sup>3</sup>. Their achievements deserve all our esteem; now however, we can try to improve upon them.

When the temples on the island of Philae were dismantled, in order to be rebuilt on Agilkia Island<sup>4</sup>, the site provided a number of archaeological surprises. A large number of decorated fragments and architectural elements were recovered that derived from the Hathor temple. An initial study, both epigraphic and architectural, suggested the possibility of rebuilding the Roman forecourt nearly in its entirety in front of the

<sup>1</sup> B. PORTER and R. MOSS, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs and Paintings*, VI. *Upper Egypt: Chief Temples* (Oxford, 1939), 251-3, esp. 251.

<sup>2</sup> W.R. DAWSON and E.P. UPHILL, *Who Was Who in Egyptology*, Third Revised Edition by M.L. BIERBRIER (London, 1995), 265.

<sup>3</sup> DAWSON, UPHILL, BIERBRIER, *Who Was Who*<sup>3</sup>, 32; G. DARESSY, ‘Alexandre Barsanti’, *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte* 17 (1917), 245-60 with pl. [IV]. This is the proper occasion to celebrate Barsanti, since he was born exactly 150 years ago.

<sup>4</sup> See in general A. GIAMMARUSTI and A. ROCCATI, *File. Storia e Vita di un Santuario Egizio* (Novara, 1980).



Ptolemaic shrine. This structure had been only provisionally restored at the time when the old Aswan dam was constructed (1902), and many slabs (viz. the huge architraves which once rested on the floral capitals of the columns) were left lying on the ground. Unfortunately, no restoration project of such extent was foreseen in the agreement for the rescue of the temples of Philae; its realization was entrusted to the Centre of Documentation in Cairo. During the past thirty years, however, no significant work was undertaken, while Agilkia Island developed into an important tourist attraction, visited daily by thousands of visitors.

Therefore Prof. A. Roccati, who had worked for an entire year at Philae during the removal of the architectural structures, requested permission for a preparatory expedition to evaluate the nature and costs of an operation aiming to complete the recovery of this unique sanctuary, achieved by the Italian firm Condotte-Mazzi. In this connection we would like to acknowledge the helpful reception given by the Permanent Committee and by the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization, Prof. Zahi Hawass. The Compagnia di San Paolo, Turin, ensured the funding for the group of specialists on site: architect, restorer, information technology expert, photographer, and epigraphers.

A complete record of all scattered blocks and fragments, which number about 250, was encoded in our files, and a basic check of the (incorrectly) reconstructed masonry was made. While the estimated cost of this undertaking exceeded the budget allotted to our team, some preliminary results of the mission's work, though of brief duration, are clearly worthy of presentation.

To introduce to this subject, I shall review the background information about the temple, starting with Captain Lyons who commenced his work on the temples of Philae in November 1895<sup>5</sup>. His official remit was to insure their stability and preserve them from the decay which might result from the old dam. Until March 1896 Barsanti assisted Lyons. The Temple of Hathor, built of sandstone from the Qertassi quarries, was "cleared" – I am using Lyons' term – on that occasion. He hadn't actually discovered it as he did the Temples of Arensnuphis, Harendotes and others, but his work enabled its original extent to be seen for the first time. Founded by Ptolemy VI Philometor, it consisted of two rooms, a vestibule with two columns, and a sanctuary. Later, probably under Ptolemy VIII, according to Gerhard Haeny<sup>6</sup>, another room was added, extending to the eastern end. In early Roman times a porch was erected on the west with six columns north and south and screen walls between them. Concurrently or shortly thereafter, a platform was built at the back of the temple, overlooking the river, and with a passage in the substructure, so that one could pass through it along

<sup>5</sup> H.G. LYONS, *A Report on the Island and Temples of Philae* (London, 1896).

<sup>6</sup> G. HAENY, 'A short architectural history of Philae', *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 85 (1985), 197-233, partic. 230.

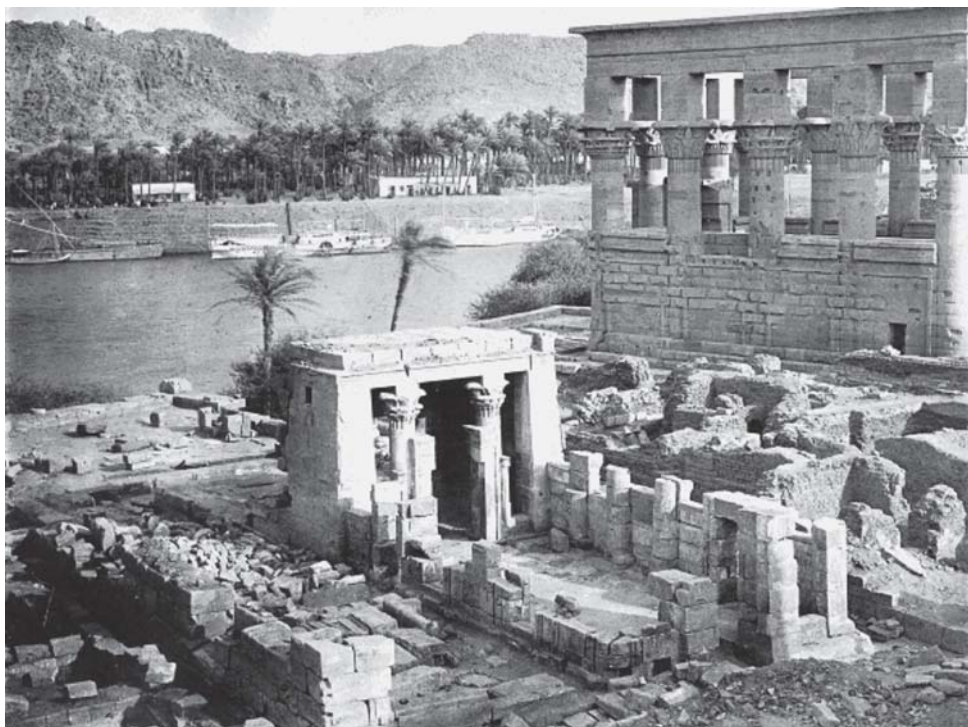


Fig. 1. The Hathor Temple in 1896 (from H.G. LYONS, *Report*, pl. 12).

the river bank. This part and the new eastern sanctuary show the most severe losses (fig. 1): the forecourt, too, had been pulled down and many blocks reused to build – quite roughly indeed – a Coptic chapel and houses on the north side. On the south side, by contrast, a number of houses were built, but probably before the destruction of the temple, because they were constructed of mudbrick, not stone. Many of them were destroyed in turn, and nothing was left *in situ*: Captain Lyons reported that four coins dating from 1860 were found two meters below floor level of a house near the south door of the forecourt.

The reconstruction of the columns (all the capitals had been cut into small fragments) with their screen walls was completed during those months and in another campaign, lasting about one month between November and December 1902<sup>7</sup>, before Barsanti

<sup>7</sup> A. BARSANTI, 'Rapport sur les travaux de consolidation et de réparation exécutés à Philæ en 1902', in: G. MASPERO (ed.), 'La protection de Philæ pendant l'hiver de 1902 et l'été de 1903', *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* 4 (1903), 244-67, part. 250.

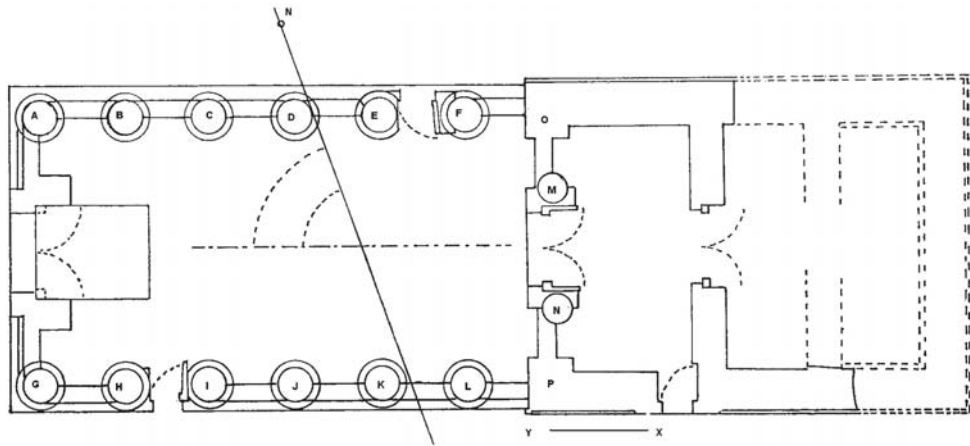


Fig. 2. The temple of Hathor  
(DAUMAS, 'Les propylées du temple d'Hathor à Philae', 2, fig. 1).

devoted himself to the more difficult task of restoring the Temple of Edfu. About 70 years later, as everyone knows, the temple was completely 'destroyed' and rebuilt on Agilkia Island.

### History and cultic role of the temple (Emanuele M. CIAMPINI)

The foundation of the Temple of Hathor at Philae (fig. 2) dates to the first half of the Ptolemaic era, when Ptolemy VI elevated the inner part of the sanctuary, the pronaos, and the western gate of the building, as shown by the pharaonic decoration and by the Greek inscription, from the reign of Ptolemy VIII, dedicating the sanctuary to Aphrodite<sup>8</sup>. In this first phase a mudbrick wall enclosed the area in front of the pronaos<sup>9</sup>. Later, during the reign of Augustus, this precinct wall was replaced by a vestibule built in sandstone, with a northern and a southern passage. In the decoration as a whole, the role of the goddesses Hathor and Isis, who play essential roles in the island's theology, is clearly recognizable. The inscriptions of Ptolemy VI associate them with the southern and northern parts of the building, as is shown by the royal titulary on the columns of the pronaos (fig. 3): at the south "Hathor Mistress of Biggah, Eye of Ra, Mistress

<sup>8</sup> A. BERNAND, *Les inscriptions grecques de Philae. Tome I: Époque ptolémaïque* (Paris, 1969), 153-7 (n. 17); this inscription on the inner architrave of the pronaos is one of the few Greek foundation texts in the temples of Philae.

<sup>9</sup> G. HAENY, *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 85, 230-1.

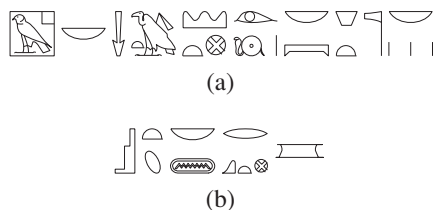


Fig. 3. Hathor and Isis in the inscriptions of Ptolemy VI on the pronaos' columns: south (a) and north (b).

of Heaven, Queen of all the gods, who gives life” is mentioned, while at the north, the pharaoh is called “beloved by Isis, Mistress of Philae”. Their topographical connections here are clear: Isis is the mistress of the main temple, while Hathor is associated with Biggah, the island directly to the west of Philae, and towards which the temple opens. Furthermore, the name of the temple, *p3 ˆ n ˆ s*, “the House of Calling”<sup>10</sup>, confirms the role of the building in the return of the Eye of Re to Egypt<sup>11</sup>.

The distribution of both texts and scenes in the Ptolemaic decoration of the western gateway confirms the association of Hathor with the south and Isis with the north. Despite its fragmentary preservation, it enables identification of deities associated with the myth of Hathor’s (or more precisely, Hathor-Tefnet’s) return. On the southern doorjamb of the gateway Upset “Mistress of the Flame in Biggah”<sup>12</sup> and Hathor “the Great, Mistress of Biggah” (fig. 4) are still visible: the fiery and furious potency of the solar eye (Upset) is represented here together with her positive Hathoric aspect, while the mention of Biggah refers to the island where the divine transformation takes place. This complex is confirmed as well by the decoration of a fragmentary architrave, now lying north of the temple<sup>13</sup>, which shows Ptolemy offering wine to Harendotes “Son of Isis, Mistress of Philae”, to Hathor “Mistress of Biggah, daughter of Re, she who comes to Egypt”, and to Harpokrates.

The Roman decoration of the vestibule is consistent with Ptolemaic tradition: Hathor and Isis are still the two main deities of the temple, and their presence in the cult corresponds to their nature and their role in local tradition. Thus, in the decoration of the

<sup>10</sup> See F. DAUMAS, ‘Les propylées du temple d’Hathor à Philae et le culte de la déesse’, *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 95 (1968), 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> D. INCONNU-BOUQUILLON, *Le mythe de la Déesse Lontaine à Philae*, Bibliothèque d’étude 132 (Le Caire, 2001), with earlier bibliography.

<sup>12</sup> For the relationship of Upset to Tefnet see: H. JUNKER, *Die Onurislegende*, Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, Philosophisch-historische Klasse. Denkschriften, 59. Band (Wien, 1917), 83-6.

<sup>13</sup> B. MORARDET, ‘Notizie da File – IV. Matériaux pour servir à la reconstruction du temple d’Hathor à Philae’, *Oriens Antiquus* 20 (1981), 139-55, published this architrave, together with other fragments of the western gateway.

eastern side of the main gate we meet again Hathor (south) and Isis (north); their relationship to two different local religious traditions are reflected by the crowns worn by Pharaoh Augustus: at south, in the presence of Hathor, he wears the crown of Onuris-Shu, the deity whose function is essential for the return of the goddess to Egypt; in the northern scene, with Isis, he wears a crown connected with Osiris (Osirian crown). These underscore the Pharaoh's role in two different mythic contexts: the return of the Eye of Re (south: Onuris-Shu crown) and the Osirian tradition related to the divine tomb at Biggah (north: Osirian crown).

According to Bernard Morardet, when Barsanti undertook reconstructions at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century he misunderstood the correct disposition of the blocks<sup>14</sup>: thus, the two scenes of fumigation before Isis on the inner north doorjamb are actually part of one and the same scene, as the text which covered the north reverse of the gate shows. This text is a short version of a well-known invocation to Hathor celebrating the wine offering as the fundamental act in her return to Egypt<sup>15</sup>. Many fragments of the doorjamb bearing this same text now lie north of the temple, along with several segments of Roman architraves from the vestibule.

This cultic complex can be recognized as well in the Roman decoration of the pronaos façade. The four scenes from Augustus' reign depict a range of roles that the pharaoh assumes according to the nature of the goddesses: in the upper registers, the king offers the *menat* to Hathor “of the Hall of Calling, [...] Mistress of Heaven, Mistress of Philae, Queen of the Abaton”, and sistra to Isis “the Great, the God's Mother, Mistress of Philae, given life, Mistress of the Abaton, Queen of all foreign lands”; in the lower registers, he offers to the solar Eye in her hypostasis as Sekhmet “the Great, Mistress of the Flame, Eye of Re, Mistress of Heaven, Mistress of the Abaton and Philae” (south), and Tefnet “<Eye of> Re, the Queen, Mistress of the Abaton, she who overthrows Apophis with her fiery breath” (north). The furious nature of the last two deities is confirmed by Pharaoh's ritual acts: the overthrow of evil represented by Apophis<sup>16</sup>, and the new order after the danger of the *ꜥdt rnpt*, represented by the offering of the *wnšb*. The façade of the pronaos could then be understood to summarize the theology of the temple: a place where the pharaoh adores the Eye of Re in its positive aspect as Hathor, whose “beautiful face” is often mentioned in the

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 142-52.

<sup>15</sup> H. STERNBERG-EL HOTABI, *Ein Hymnus an die Göttin Hathor und das Ritual 'Hathor das Trankopfer darbringen' nach den Tempeltexten der griechisch-römischen Zeit*, Rites égyptiens 7 (Bruxelles, 1992); J. QUACK, 'Bemerkungen zum Ostrakon Glasgow D 1925.91 und zum Menu-Lied', *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 29 (2001), 238-306; S. CAUVILLE, *Les Fêtes d'Hathor*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 105 (Leuven, 2002). We wish to thank Prof. J. Quack for some bibliographical references and suggestions relating to the analysis of the decoration.

<sup>16</sup> For the nature of the conflict against this force of non-existence, see. J.F. BORGHOUTS, *Book of the Dead [39]. From Shouting to Structure*, *Studien zum Altägyptischen Totenbuch* 10 (Wiesbaden, 2007), 56-61.

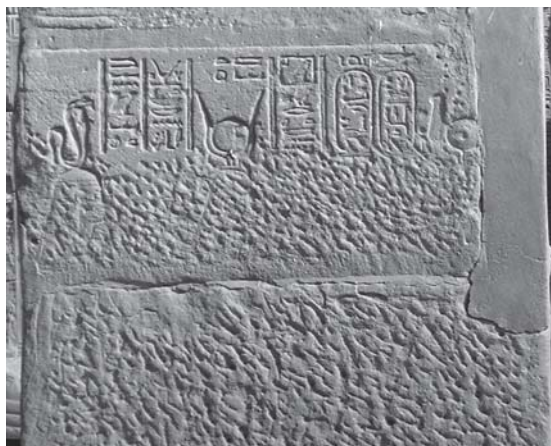


Fig. 4. Southern doorjamb of the western gate (part.): Hathor and Upset.

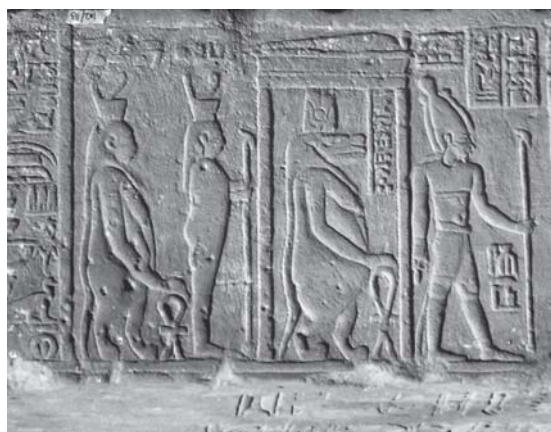


Fig. 5. Personifications of months on the vestibule architrave.

texts of the vestibule and pronaos<sup>17</sup>. The return of the goddess to Egypt finds its natural setting on Biggah, the island which lay at the border of the country, and where divine fury is pacified.

The celebration of Hathor's return to Egypt is surely the core of the temple's decorative program – above all in the Roman vestibule, richly articulated on both cosmic

<sup>17</sup> See the two hymns published by DAUMAS, *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 95, 10-3.

and human levels: on the columns of the vestibule, priests, monkeys, and figures of Bes play musical instruments and sing the goddess' praises, while on the architraves which now lie north of the temple, she is celebrated by a cortege of months (fig. 5). These personifications of new life provide testimony to the cosmic nature of her return, which is connected to the passage of the year and the Nile flood. According to the Egyptian tradition, the astronomical personifications express the regular succession of years and the renewal of the life brought by the inundation<sup>18</sup>; this aspect is confirmed as well by the orientation of the temple, which takes the rising of Sothis into account<sup>19</sup>.

All the aspects just noted center on the roles of Hathor and Isis: their nature and the strong association with Biggah confirm the importance of "passage" – the advent of the New Year and the Nile flood – in the theology of Philae: a topic celebrated again in later structures (such as Hadrian's Gateway), and which is fundamental to the understanding of the small temple of Hathor in the island's context.

### **Epigraphic work** (Federico CONTARDI)

The goal of the epigraphic work undertaken by our archaeological mission is to document and study the texts and representations in the Temple of Hathor on Philae. Two circumstances directly effect our work. First, relatively little remains of the temple *in situ*; many blocks lie on the ground outside the north wall of the temple. Secondly, some of those blocks which are now incorporated into the restored temple are not in their original setting but occupy instead those positions where they were placed in the restorations which Barsanti supervised in 1902. For these reasons, our epigraphic work has included not only restoring those blocks currently unplaced to their rightful, original locations, but also correcting the errors of earlier restoration. We would like to present just three samples of our virtual reconstructions, all concerning the Roman forecourt (fig. 6). These examples illustrate only some results of our project to complete a virtual restoration of the Temple of Hathor.

The forecourt of the temple is delimited on the north and south by a series of 6 columns with intercolumnar constructions (screen walls) bearing reliefs and inscriptions. On the columns are representations of musicians and the texts of the songs they intoned during the celebrations on the occasion of the mythical return of the goddess Hathor to Philae from her tour of devastation in the south. The reliefs on the blocks between the columns depict Emperor Augustus presenting ritual offerings (wine, oil, sistra,

<sup>18</sup> D. MENDEL, *Die Monatsgöttinnen in Tempeln und in privaten Kult*, Rites égyptiennes 11 (Turnhout, 2005). The renewal of the life connected to astronomical entities is already recognizable in the Middle Kingdom tradition of the decans: E.M. CIAMPINI, 'Invocazioni astrali su coperchi di sarcofagi del Medio Regno', *MHNH. Revista Internacional de Investigación sobre Magia y Astrología Antiguas* 7 (2007), 93-114.

<sup>19</sup> We thank Prof. J.A. Belmonte for this information.

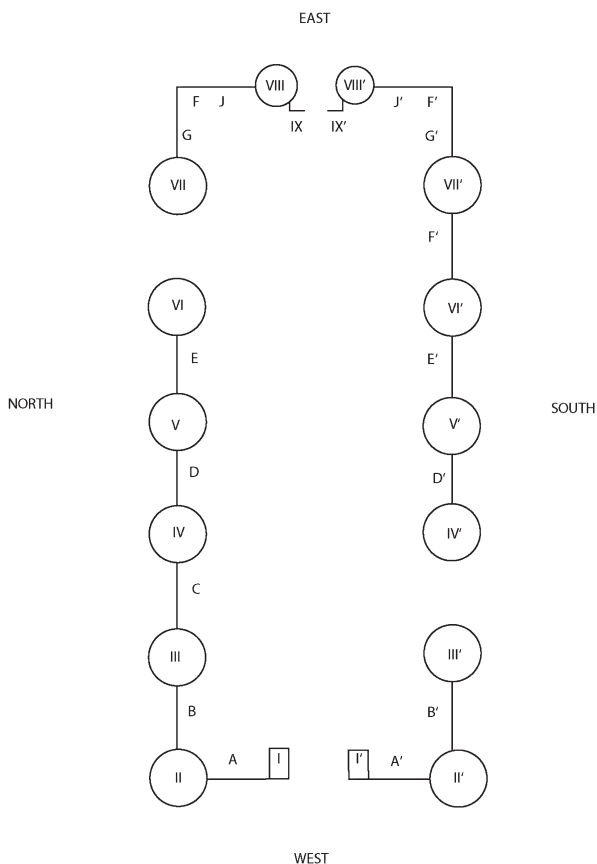


Fig. 6. The Roman forecourt.

crowns etc.) to the divine manifestations of the goddess. What was the exact meaning attached to the offering scenes in the context of the celebration marking Hathor's return?

The choice of these scenes did not result from a need to conform to the typical requirements of *decorum* for temple decoration. Their presence is justified by the text of Column II' on the south side of the forecourt, which informs us that the return of the goddess from Bugem should be accompanied by festive offerings of unguent, libations, wine and so forth.

1. Nowadays the **intercolumnar reliefs D** on the north side of the forecourt show Emperor Augustus offering a *wensheb* to a goddess labelled Satet (fig. 7A). Examination





Fig. 7A. Intercolumnar reliefs D,  
actual state.



Fig. 7B. Intercolumnar reliefs D,  
virtual reconstruction.

of the figure and her headgear reveals that she cannot be Satet, but some rather other goddess, namely Mut. Among the blocks which lie to the north outside the temple, there is one that belongs here. The hieroglyphs name Mut as the deity whose crown is depicted on the right side.

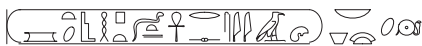
In fact, this block belongs in the position now occupied by the block with Satet's name. In the virtual reconstruction, it is shown where it belongs (fig. 7B). When it is inserted in its proper place, the crowns of the king and the goddess are correctly and completely shown.

Text:



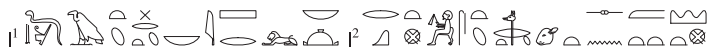
*nswt bitì nb t3wy 3wtkrdr*

The king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Autocrator.



*s3 R' nb h'w k3ysrs 'nh dt mry Pth 'Ist*

The son of Ra, lord of the crowns, Caesar, may he live eternally, beloved of Ptah and Isis.



l<sup>1</sup> *dd mdw in Mwt wrt nb išrw nb iw* l<sup>2</sup> *rꜥ špst wsrt hnty snmt*

Words spoken by Mut, the Great, Mistress of Isheru, Mistress of Philae<sup>20</sup>, the noble one, the mighty one, foremost of Biggah.



*hnk wnšb n mwt.f wsrt htp ib.s m pr im*

Offering the *wensheb* to his mother, the mighty one, may her heart be satisfied with that which comes forth therefrom.

2. Only the lower block of **intercolumnar reliefs B** remains *in situ* (fig. 8A). It preserves the lower part of the caption describing the scene as illustrating offerings of wine. Although indications for identifying the divine female recipient of the offerings are lacking, she must be Hathor because the intercolumnar reliefs B and B' are analogous to the complementary reliefs G and G', showing depictions of Hathor and Isis, respectively. We found the missing block among the loose blocks outside the temple. Unfortunately, as can be seen in the reconstruction, the mid-section with the bust and head of the goddess is not preserved (fig. 8B).

Text:



*nswt bitī nb tšwy šwtkrdr*

The king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Autocrator.



*sš R' nb h'w kšysrs 'nh dt mry Pth 'Ist*

The son of Ra, lord of the crowns, Caesar, may he live eternally, beloved of Ptah and Isis.



l<sup>1</sup> *dd mdw in Hwt-Hr nb 'Iwnt irt R' hry-ib [ ]* l<sup>2</sup> *nb pt hnwt ntrw nb(w) špst wsrt [ ]*

Words spoken by Hathor, Mistress of Dendera, Eye of Ra, which is in [ ], Mistress of Heaven, Queen of all the gods, the noble one, the mighty one [ ]



[ ] *m šš s'm.t im.f r' nb*

[..] with wine, may you drink of it every day.


<sup>20</sup> For the writing of the name for Philae with the sign , see: H. GAUTHIER, *Dictionnaire des noms géographiques contenus dans les textes hiéroglyphiques* I (Le Caire, 1925), 30.



Fig. 8A. Intercolumnar reliefs B, actual state.

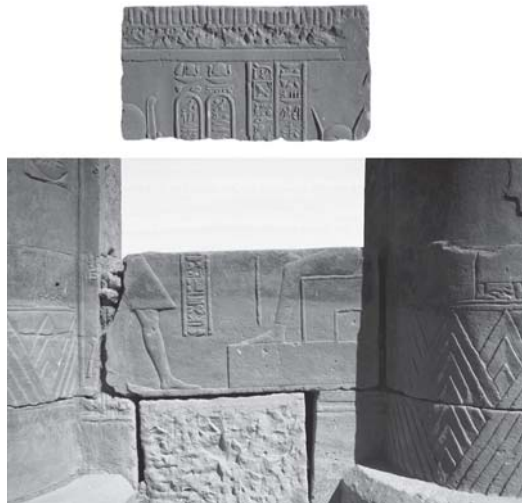


Fig. 8B. Intercolumnar reliefs B, virtual reconstruction.

3. **Column II** on the north side was restored some time ago (fig. 9A)<sup>21</sup>. The segments are cemented together. The upper fragment is nowadays not in its original position, which is a little bit to the right, so that the first vertical line of hieroglyphs on the fragment corresponds to the first line of the entire inscription. Above the flute player is a text in four columns. The lower part of the text was found among the loose blocks outside the temple. Fig. 9B shows the virtual replacement of this block. Unfortunately,

<sup>21</sup> The text is so fragmentary that it was not included by DAUMAS, *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 95, 1-17.



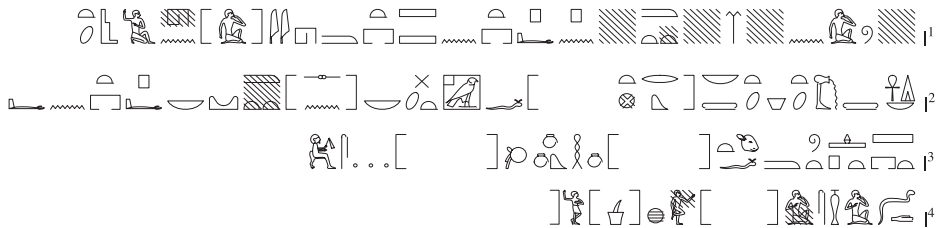
Fig. 9A. Column II, actual state.



Fig. 9B. Column II, virtual reconstruction.


the text remains fragmentary. It is a song which the priest accompanies on his instrument. The same figure and a similar text are found on the column in front (Column II')<sup>22</sup>.


The text proclaims the return of Hathor from Bugem and the celebration with ritual offerings such as beer and a crown.



<sup>l1</sup> [ ]? n [ ] m [ ] mt [ ] pn p3 ' n 'š m hy [h]nw 'Ist <sup>l2</sup> di 'nh nb iw w'b hnw nb iw [rk ]f  
 Hwt-Hr wrt nb [snm]t nb p3 ' n 'š <sup>l3</sup> htp.ti m hnty.f [ ] hnkṯ mdh [ ] šps <sup>l4</sup> dd hsw [ ] ib3 hb [ ]  
 [ ] this, the House<sup>23</sup> of Calling<sup>24</sup> is in rejoicing and in happiness, Isis, given life<sup>25</sup>, Mistress  
 of the Abaton, Queen and Mistress of Philae [ ], Hathor, the Great, Mistress of Biggah, Mistress  
 of the House of Calling, may she rest in it, [ ] beer, the diadem, [ ] reciting, singing, [ ]  
 dancing, dancing [ ]

<sup>22</sup> See Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>23</sup> In the word  the sign for *t* has no phonetic meaning; in the later stages of the Egyptian language, the old word for house 't was treated as a masculine substantive (Coptic H1; see also A. ERMAN, H. GRAPOW, *Wörterbuch der Aegyptischen Sprache* I (Leipzig, 1926), 159,15).

<sup>24</sup> 'š is incorrectly written .

<sup>25</sup> The meaning of *di 'nh* in this context is possibly '(Isis) who gives life'.