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Religious encounters on the southern Egyptian frontier in Late Antiquity (AD 298-642)

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3. Speaking Stones: Philae as a Nubian Holy Place

A rich archive of graffiti has been preserved on the walls of the temples of Philae. Among them are inscriptions written mainly in demotic and Greek that date to the fourth and fifth centuries. As demotic graffiti from this period are a unique phenomenon, we will first compare Philae with other cult sites in Egypt. We will then analyse the demotic and Greek inscriptions from Philae to see what difference there is in their usage by looking at the number and location of the inscriptions. In particular, we will consider what the difference is in number and location between the first three centuries of our era, and the fourth and fifth centuries. We will also compare the structure of these inscriptions, which in large part consist of pilgrimage inscriptions.

Philae and the Obsolescence of the Demotic Script

Demotic is the most cursive form of the Ancient Egyptian scripts. Developed out of late hieratic, it was written from the middle of the seventh century BC onwards, and endured 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. From the first century onwards, demotic was increasingly restricted to the literary and religious sphere of the temple: the last preserved ostrakon dates to 232/233, the last preserved papyrus to 244-249. For the fourth and fifth centuries we have to rely entirely on the graffiti on the temple walls of Philae.²²⁰

The modern viewer is often struck by the sight of these graffiti, which are scratched in or painted on the walls of the Ancient Egyptian temples in a seemingly unconcerned way. Epigraphy differentiates between inscribed and painted graffiti (*dipinti*), but in Egyptology both categories are usually termed 'graffiti', whether inscribed or written in ink.²²¹ Demotic graffiti are heirs to a long tradition. The oldest Ancient Egyptian graffiti are found on rocks and date back to the Old Kingdom.²²² Demotic graffiti are in general neither anonymous nor official and have been engraved with religious intentions in places that were not originally intended for that purpose.²²³ Thus, the marked difference between Ancient Egyptian and modern graffiti is that the Ancient Egyptian ones are always written with religious intent.

With the disappearance of the demotic graffiti of Philae, the last remaining of the Ancient Egyptian scripts disappeared. Although the metaphor of 'death' has been applied to the disappearance of demotic, its going out of use is not the same as 'language death'. Whereas languages do not disappear all of a sudden, the knowledge of writing scripts may end abruptly. It is therefore better to use the term 'obsolescence' for the disappearance of demotic.²²⁴ Another difference between scripts and languages in pre-modern societies is that writing was restricted to a small group of literate

²²⁰ K.-T. Zauzich, 'Demotische Texte römischer Zeit', in G. Grimm, H. Heinen, E. Winter (eds), *Das römisch-byzantinische Ägypten* (Mainz, 1983) 77-80; N. Lewis, 'The Demise of the Demotic Document: When and Why', *JEA* 79 (1993) 276-81; Bagnall, *Egypt*, 235-7; M. Depauw, *A Companion to Demotic Studies* (Brussels, 1997) 22-6; Hoffmann, *Ägypten*, 13-9; T.S. Richter, *Rechtssemantik und forensische Rhetorik. Untersuchungen zu Wortschatz, Stil und Grammatik der Sprache koptischer Rechtsurkunden* (Leipzig, 2002) 11-6; S. Houston, J. Baines, J. Cooper, 'Last Writing: Script Obsolescence in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Mesoamerica', *CSSH* 45 (2003) 430-79 at 435-50.

²²¹ Depauw, *Companion*, 80.

²²² H.-J. Thissen, 'Graffiti', *LÄ* II (1977) 880-2. For the graffiti of pharaonic Egypt, see A.J. Peden, *The Graffiti of Pharaonic Egypt. Scope and Roles of Informal Writings (c. 3100-332 B.C.)* (Leiden, 2001).

²²³ According to H.-J. Thissen, *Die demotischen Graffiti von Medinet Habu* (Sommerhausen, 1989) 1-2, the definition of demotic graffiti is: 'Demotischen Graffiti sind Inschriften unterschiedlichen Umfanges, die an nicht dafür vorgesehenen Orten von dort beruflich Tätigen oder Besuchern angebracht worden und zumeist als Zeugnisse persönlicher Frömmigkeit anzusehen sind'.

²²⁴ Houston, Baines and Cooper, 'Last Writing', 432. Pace Cruz-Urbe, 'Death of Demotic'.

people.²²⁵ The centre of knowledge and learning in Ancient Egypt was the temple. After Greek had become the dominant script in the public domain, demotic was pushed to the sidelines and eventually restricted to the religious context of the temple. The obsolescence of the script at Philae is therefore also an important indicator of the end of Ancient Egyptian religion as an institution, for the temple as a centre of knowledge and learning including their practitioners, the priests, disappeared with the sacred script.

It may be useful, then, to compare the case of Philae with other cult sites in Egypt. Besides on temple walls, demotic graffiti also appear in tombs and stone quarries. What is the difference between graffiti on temple walls and those in other locations? How are demotic graffiti in Egypt diffused geographically? How many graffiti are found in these places? What is their chronological range? And what do these data tell us about the obsolescence of demotic at Philae?

In order to solve these questions, a list is given in an appendix with the location, number and chronological range of the graffiti (Appendix 2). The list is based on a recent survey of demotic graffiti appended to an edition of five demotic stelae.²²⁶ This survey excludes the dates of the graffiti because several of them are disputed or simply lacking. However, general patterns can be deduced from the dates, which are significant and illustrative for our purpose, and therefore they have been included in our list. Moreover, the survey can be supplemented and updated by several other graffiti, although the list given in the appendix is not intended to be exhaustive.²²⁷ Finally, the main division in the categories tombs, quarries and temples is not always consistent, as appears from the graffiti that have been found in marginal desert areas on rocks.²²⁸ These, however, will not be considered here.

To start our analysis with the first two categories, and keeping in mind the religious aspect of the graffiti, it is not surprising that they have been found in tombs and quarries. In burial rituals, the Egyptian gods always played an important role. Moreover, every quarry worshipped its own or a regional god.²²⁹ Although the numbers of these graffiti are small in comparison with those of the temples, they occur in several Egyptian sites. They are found in the main burial sites along the Nile such as Saqqara and the West Bank at Thebes, as well as in the oases. The graffiti from the stone quarries are situated in the main quarry areas in Egypt. The oldest dated graffito in these categories comes from the Wadi Hammamat (Saite/Persian period), the last dated one from the Kharga oasis (AD 113).

As is to be expected, graffiti on temple walls are much more frequent, but they do not predate the Ptolemaic period. Although they are diffused over practically all extant major religious centres, the greatest number of them has been found in the area around Thebes (about a thousand). However, contrast the 'several hundred' graffiti found within the temple precinct of Karnak, measuring 1.5 by 0.8 km, with Philae where 450 graffiti have been found within an area of 460 by 150 m! Most graffiti seem to come from Upper Egypt but, as so often, this preponderance may be due to the hazards of time and place.²³⁰ The graffiti from Kom Abu Billo and Tanis in the Delta show that the practice of scratching religious messages on temple walls was a habit that was widely diffused in Egypt during the Graeco-Roman period.

Within this general pattern, it is striking that Philae and the temples of the Dodekaschoinos are the only localities in Egypt where demotic graffiti have been found post-dating the second century. Although only a small percentage of the

²²⁵ Houston, Baines and Cooper, 'Last Writing', 432-5.

²²⁶ A. Farid, *Fünf demotische Stelen* (Berlin, 1995) 201-5.

²²⁷ I kindly thank E. Cruz-Urbe, J.D. Ray and H.-J. Thissen for compiling the list.

²²⁸ E.g. C. di Cerbo, R. Jasnow, 'Five Persian Period Demotic and Hieroglyphic Graffiti from the Site of Apa Tyrannos at Armant', *Enchoria* 23 (1996) 32-8, which date to 14 October 504 BC.

²²⁹ D. Devauchelle, 'Notes sur les inscriptions démotiques des carrières de Tourah et de Māsarah', *ASAE* 69 (1983) 169-82 at 177-8.

²³⁰ Cf. Bagnall, *Egypt*, 6-7, 15-6.

transmitted texts are dated, and it cannot be ruled out that there were other Egyptian temples in which demotic was still being written in the fourth and fifth centuries (for example at Hermonthis), it seems that Philae was building upon a strong regional tradition of writing demotic as a sacred script. After the collapse of Meroe, no graffiti survive from the Dodekaschoinos. As marginalised scripts need few people to be maintained, they can persist for a long time under special circumstances.²³¹ It is safe to assume that the special relations with the southern peoples favoured the script being kept alive at Philae. But the very use of demotic in the fourth and fifth centuries at Philae only also seems to point to an isolated position of the script and therefore of the Ancient Egyptian cults. An isolated position further appears from an analysis of the inscriptions from the island.

Demotic and Greek inscriptions

It is often hard to distinguish between the strictly defined demotic graffiti ('occasional' and 'religious') and Greek inscriptions ('official'), for sometimes demotic graffiti have an official character and in other cases Greek inscriptions an unofficial one.²³² Although generally this distinction may be true, it is better to treat all the texts together under the heading 'inscriptions' and see if we can deduce certain patterns.²³³

The following graph shows the number of Greek and demotic inscriptions from the first until fifth centuries.²³⁴ The Greek inscriptions from the Ptolemaic period have been left out because they do not immediately concern us here.²³⁵ Inscriptions that testify to the Christian community on the island, have also been excluded and will be studied separately in Chs. 5 and 9. Finally, although there are some Latin and Meroitic inscriptions from Philae, the former are too few in number and the latter are imperfectly understood and only rarely dated.²³⁶ Of the 450 demotic inscriptions from Philae, seventy-seven are dated (17.1 percent).²³⁷ Because several persons are also mentioned in other, undated inscriptions, sixty-four have been added, so that the total of the dated demotic texts amounts to 141 (31.3 percent).²³⁸ Of the 361 Greek inscriptions from Philae, including the Christian ones, 160 are dated (44.3 percent).

²³¹ Houston, Baines and Cooper, 'Last Writing', 433.

²³² Cf. *I.Philae.Dem.*, pp. 8-9.

²³³ See also the wide definition of Greek graffiti used in a recent epigraphical handbook, B.H. McLean, *An Introduction to Greek Epigraphy of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods from Alexander the Great down to the Reign of Constantine (323 B.C.-A.D. 337)* (Ann Arbor, 2002) 207-8, and his remarks on the categorisation of inscriptions, pp. 181-2. For the coexistence of Greek and demotic inscriptions, see M. Parca, 'Local Languages and Native Cultures', in J. Bodel (ed.), *Epigraphic Evidence. Ancient History from Inscriptions* (London and New York, 2001) 57-72 at 62-3.

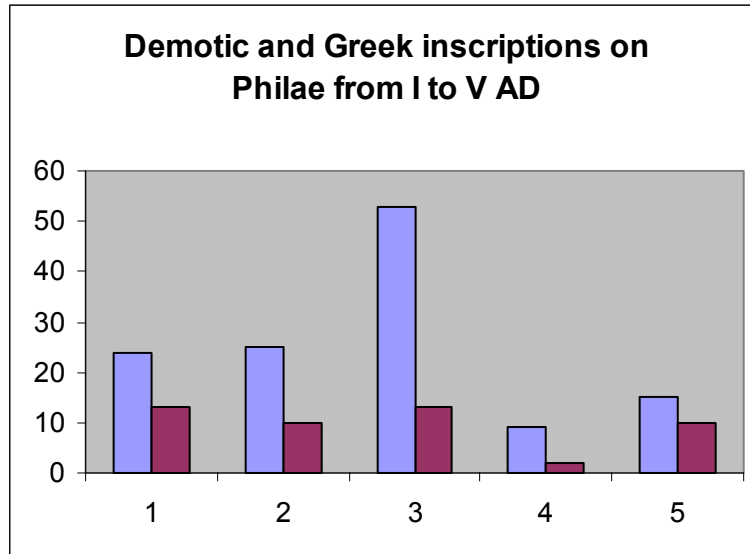
²³⁴ The Greek inscriptions are published as *I.Philae* II, the demotic ones as *I.Philae.Dem.* Thirteen Greek inscriptions dated to the Roman period (*I.Philae* II 173; *IThSy* 326-7, 333-4, 336-9, 341-4) have been excluded for they cannot be divided into centuries. Because of the break between the Ptolemaic and Roman period in the first century BC, these inscriptions have also not been included.

²³⁵ For the Greek inscriptions of the Ptolemaic period, see *I.Philae* I, complemented by *IThSy* 307-25. For Philae in the Ptolemaic period see F. Dunand, *Le culte d'Isis dans le bassin oriental de la Méditerranée*, 3 vols (Leiden, 1973) 1.150-62, E. Vassilika, *Ptolemaic Philae* (Leuven, 1989), Dietze, 'Philae', and Locher, *Nilkatarakt*, 121-41.

²³⁶ Latin inscriptions: *IThSy* 321 (bilingual), 323; *I.Philae* II 128 (trilingual), 147, 163. Meroitic inscriptions: F.L. Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions. Part II: Napata to Philae and Miscellaneous* (London, 1912) nos. 95-125 = *REM* 0095-0125, on which see Burkhardt, *Ägypter*, 47.

²³⁷ The dated inscriptions can be distilled from Burkhardt, *Ägypter*, 29-30, 43-5, 97-121.

²³⁸ On the basis of corresponding names and functions, see Burkhardt, *Ägypter*, 32-43. Add *I.Philae.Dem.* 296, 329, 251 = *FHN* III 231 (second century), 120 = *FHN* III 252, 254 = *FHN* III 262, 255 = *FHN* 256, 256 = *FHN* III 257, 257 = *FHN* III 250, 344 = *FHN* III 243, 403 = *FHN* III 263, 410 = *FHN* III 249, 411 = *FHN* III 253, 417 = *FHN* III 261 (third century), 237 (fifth century). However, this method is not always unproblematic, as it cannot be excluded that somebody else may have had the same name, e.g. *I.Philae.Dem.* 236, where we only have the name of the dedicant and his father. Another problem is the question of whether the dated texts (about 30 percent) are representative for all demotic inscriptions.



Light: demotic inscriptions
 Dark: Greek inscriptions
 1-5 (I-V): first until fifth centuries

The graph shows that demotic inscriptions are attested from the first to fifth centuries, and that they are more frequent than Greek inscriptions. On the other hand, in the Ptolemaic period this tendency is the other way round: there are eighty-four Greek inscriptions as opposed to twenty-eight in demotic. Surprisingly, in the first century BC there are sixty-one Greek inscriptions and only fourteen in demotic.

In the first three centuries of our era we see an increasing number of demotic graffiti, culminating in the third century. Although there is a discrepancy between the third and fourth centuries, demotic continues to be used, albeit much less than in the preceding centuries. The demotic inscriptions of the fourth century are low in frequency but in the fifth century the number of demotic graffiti slightly increases again, to disappear completely thereafter. Conversely, the number of Greek inscriptions seems to have been fairly stable during these same centuries, with the exception of, again, the fourth century.

Can we distil any patterns from these numbers? The general tendency of Greek inscriptions from the Roman period to increase in the first two centuries of our era and then to decrease steeply in the third (the so-called 'epigraphic habit'), appears to be absent from the Greek inscriptions of Philae.²³⁹ On the other hand, it can be no coincidence that in the third century the high number of demotic inscriptions seems to coincide with the greatest involvement of the Meroites at Philae.²⁴⁰ 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.²⁴¹ In the same way, it is tempting to relate the number of demotic graffiti after the fall of Meroe to the political

²³⁹ R. MacMullen, 'The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire', *AJPh* 103 (1982) 233-46, and 'Frequency of Inscriptions from Roman Lydia', *ZPE* 65 (1986) 237-8. In a recent article, this development is ascribed to different attitudes towards Romanisation, E.A. Meyer, 'Explaining the Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire: The Evidence of Epitaphs', *JRS* 80 (1990) 74-96. For an overview of the discussion on this topic, see J. Bodel, 'Epigraphy and the Ancient Historian', in Bodel, *Epigraphic Evidence*, 1-56 at 6-10.

²⁴⁰ E.g. Török, 'Geschichte Meroes', 284-5.

²⁴¹ On Meroitic cursive, see N.B. Millet, 'The Meroitic Script', in P.T. Daniels, W. Bright (eds), *The World's Writing Systems* (Oxford, 1996) 84-7.

developments in the Dodekaschoinos.²⁴² The traditional link with the south probably received a severe blow in this century, after which it recovered slightly in the fifth century under the influence of the increasingly organised Blemmyan and Noubadian tribes on the frontier. In short, it may be suggested that there is a continuum in Nubian influence on Philae, but that it presents itself on a more modest scale from the fourth century onwards.

Patterns can further be detected in the places where the inscriptions appear on the island. They are found on practically all the main buildings and tend to be located closer to the temple of Isis as time passes. For example, the inscriptions in the porch of Nectanebo range in date from the Ptolemaic until the early Roman period, whereas the inscriptions on the first pylon nearer to the temple date from the Ptolemaic period until the third century AD.²⁴³

Two places remained virtually untouched by Greek inscriptions. Firstly, although several hundred demotic and Meroitic inscriptions can be found in the Mammisi or Birthhouse (Fig. 3, no. N), only one Greek inscription was, significantly, written on the exterior wall.²⁴⁴ Besides being one of the best-preserved Birthhouses in Egypt, Philae's holy building is of particular interest because it is situated between the two pylons of the Isis temple.²⁴⁵ Normally, a Birthhouse lies outside the inner temple (temenos) wall. The simple explanation for the remarkable location of the Birthhouse of Philae within the wall (W) is that it was built before the first pylon. This is clear from the passageway in the west tower of the first pylon that is directed towards the entrance of the Birthhouse and two walls connecting the first pylon with the Birthhouse.²⁴⁶ As it was normally forbidden for laymen to enter the inner temple domain through the first pylon, pilgrims would not have been allowed inside the Birthhouse at Philae either.²⁴⁷ Being the starting-point for processions, and therefore an appropriate place for dedicating pilgrimage inscriptions, priests would therefore have inscribed demotic inscriptions on the walls of the Birthhouse. It seems to have been 'not done' to inscribe Greek texts here.

The second place where no Greek inscriptions have been found is an exclusively Meroitic room, called the 'Meroitic Chamber', between the first and second pylon. It contains Meroitic inscriptions and pictures dating to the third century and shows a procession of Meroitic priests.²⁴⁸ It seems that the influence of the Meroites in the third century was so great that they were allowed to have a separate cultic room on the island.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, all inscriptions are found close to the temple of Isis (M). There are three Greek inscriptions at the back of the collonade between the two pylons,²⁴⁹ two demotic inscriptions on the second pylon, and the last-dated hieroglyphic inscription, combined with a demotic graffito, on the gateway of Hadrian

²⁴² Cf. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 2, 225-35, an account based on too few sources (only fourteen inscriptions in demotic/hieroglyphic from the fourth and fifth centuries).

²⁴³ Cf. Rutherford, 'Island', 250-2.

²⁴⁴ *I.Philae* II 146.

²⁴⁵ For the Mammisi or Birthhouse see F. Daumas, *Les mammisis des temples égyptiens. Étude d'archéologie et d'histoire religieuse* (Paris, 1958), and 'Geburtshaus', *LÄ* II (1977) 462-75. The Birthhouse of Philae is published by H. Junker and E. Winter, *Das Geburtshaus des Tempels der Isis in Philä* (Vienna, 1965).

²⁴⁶ Haeny, 'Short Architectural History', 210-2.

²⁴⁷ J. Assmann, 'Le temple égyptien et la distinction entre le *dedans* et le *dehors*', in P. Borgeaud *et al.* (eds), *Le temple, lieu de conflit* (Leuven, 1994) 13-34.

²⁴⁸ Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions* 34-42; L. Török, 'Two Meroitic Studies: The Meroitic Chamber in Philae and the Administration of Nubia in the 1st to 3rd centuries A.D.', *Oikumene* 2 (1978) 217-37, and 'Remarks on the Meroitic Chamber in Philae', in *Études nubiennes* (Cairo, 1978) 313-7. The inscriptions were published by Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions*, nos. 97-111 = *REM* 0097-0111 (= *FHN* III 267).

²⁴⁹ *I.Philae* II 190-2.

(I).²⁵⁰ The Birthhouse continued to receive demotic inscriptions on its walls - seven demotic inscriptions have been found on the building, three of which have been placed on the roof.²⁵¹ Five inscriptions have been preserved inside or outside the Isis temple.²⁵² Finally, most inscriptions are found on the roof of this temple, the majority in the so-called 'Osiris Chamber' which, like the Birthhouse, was used for ritual purposes.²⁵³

To summarise, besides the circumstance that demotic and Meroitic were written in the Birthhouse and Meroitic in the Meroitic Chamber, two trends are visible in the data: diachronically, the inscriptions move closer to the temple of Isis, and, synchronically, different groups occupied different spaces (e.g. the Meroitic Chamber). These trends may be due to contested space between different groups of visitors or between visitors and temple authorities, but there is no decisive proof of this.²⁵⁴ Moreover, the diachronic development can also be explained otherwise. As a rule, inscriptions were not written in parts of the temple that were still in use, exceptions to this rule being graffiti inscribed by priests.²⁵⁵ And, indeed, priests wrote most, if not all, of the Late Antique inscriptions and they were inscribed in a limited area of the temple complex. It could thus be argued that over time fewer and fewer parts of the complex were used. Just as the number of inscriptions indicates, their location seems to point to a contraction of the temple cults. We will now turn to what the structure of these inscriptions has to say about the Late Antique cults.

Pilgrimage and Pilgrimage Inscriptions

Studying ancient pilgrimage is a very complex matter, as the character of pilgrimage changed over the centuries and pilgrimage could be initiated by different motivations.²⁵⁶ In Egypt, the story is no different. People could visit a deity or a holy place to receive an oracle (as at the Memnonion at Abydos), or to ask for divine protection or healing (as at Deir el Bahari). Others were motivated by curiosity (tombs in the Valley of Kings) and come closer to what we would call 'tourists', although the religious aspect is never wholly absent. The occasions on which the holy places were visited also varied. Some people came to join in festivities purposefully, others by chance when passing through. In this diversity of pilgrimages, those to Philae have pride of place: from the Ptolemaic period onward, the goddess Isis attracted many pilgrims from near and far.²⁵⁷

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

²⁵⁰ Demotic inscriptions: *I.Philae.Dem.* 258-9. Combined hieroglyphic-demotic inscription: *I.Philae.Dem.* 436.

²⁵¹ *I.Philae.Dem.* 96, 159, 194, 211, 236-7 (roof), 240 (roof).

²⁵² *I.Philae.Dem.* 332, 343, 351, 355; *I.Philae* II 199.

²⁵³ *I.Philae.Dem.* 364-6, 369-72, 375-6; *I.Philae* II 186, 188, 196-7. *I.Philae* II 189 and 198 were found reused as ground slabs in the West Church of Philae, but are said to have originally come from the terrace of the temple of Isis, *I.Philae* II, p. 247.

²⁵⁴ Rutherford, 'Island', 250-3. For a similar spatial and chronological analysis of graffiti at Abydos, see Rutherford, 'Pilgrimage in Greco-Roman Egypt', 182-6.

²⁵⁵ Cruz-Uribe, 'Death of Demotic', 179-80.

²⁵⁶ I. Rutherford, 'Theoria and Daršan. Pilgrimage and Vision in Greece and India', *CQ* 50 (2000) 133-46 at 133.

²⁵⁷ J. Yoyotte, 'Les pèlerinages dans l'Égypte ancienne', in A.-M. Esnoul *et al.* (eds), *Les pèlerinages* (Paris, 1960) 17-74; M. Malaise, 'Pèlerinages et pèlerins dans l'Égypte ancienne', in J. Chélini, H. Branthomme (eds), *Histoire des pèlerinages non chrétiens entre magique et sacré: le chemin des dieux* (Paris, 1987) 55-82; É. Bernard, 'Pèlerins dans l'Égypte grecque et romaine', in M.-M. Mactoux, É. Geny (eds), *Mélanges Pierre Lévêque*, 9 vols (Paris, 1988-95) 1.49-63; Frankfurter, *Pilgrimage & Holy Space*, and *Religion*, 105; Rutherford, 'Pilgrimage in Greco-Roman Egypt', 171-2.

goddess of Philae.²⁵⁸ 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.²⁵⁹ 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.²⁶⁰ It is likely that pilgrims came from Nubia, too, but there are no pilgrimage inscriptions to prove their presence.²⁶¹

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. What caused this sharp contrast with the growing popularity of the Isis cult in the whole Mediterranean Basin during the Principate?²⁶² At least part of the answer seems to be that Roman Isis, who was so popular throughout the empire, was adapted to Roman religious needs, whereas the Isis venerated at Philae remained essentially an Egyptian deity.²⁶³ These developments are therefore separate and need not have influenced each other.²⁶⁴

Few places in Egypt have as many pilgrimage inscriptions as Philae.²⁶⁵ Of the Greek inscriptions of the first three centuries of our era, twenty-three out of a total of thirty-six (63.9 percent) are pilgrimage inscriptions, and of the demotic inscriptions, seventy-two out of 102 (70.6 percent). But anyone who expects these inscriptions to convey detailed information about visitors to Philae will be disappointed: the bulk of the inscriptions were inscribed by temple personnel.²⁶⁶ Surprising though it may seem, the pilgrimage inscriptions therefore do not necessarily say anything about pilgrimage to Philae. In Ancient Egypt, the habit among pilgrims to leave an inscription on the walls of a god did not exclude priests from doing this too. On the contrary, the priests were the transmitters of knowledge and learning and it was not uncommon for them to record participation in festivals.

Greek pilgrimage inscriptions are usually referred to as *proskynemata*. The Greek word προσκύνημα derives from the verb προσκυνέω, 'fall down and worship' and, unlike the noun προσκύνησις, 'adoration', is used only in Egypt.²⁶⁷

Proskynemata appear in Egypt for the first time in the middle of the second century BC.²⁶⁸ 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'). In turn, the later demotic formula *t3*

²⁵⁸ On 26 August, 116 BC, the first four Romans came to Philae and left what are now the oldest dated Latin inscriptions of Egypt (*IThSy* 321, 323). See, most recently, J.L. Beness, T. Hillard, 'The First Romans at Philae (*CIL* I.2.2937a)', *ZPE* 144 (2003) 203-7.

²⁵⁹ Rutherford, 'Island', 236-8.

²⁶⁰ *I.Philae*I, p. 54.

²⁶¹ Rutherford, 'Island', 247-8.

²⁶² F. le Corsu, *Isis. Mythe et mystères* (Paris, 1977) 118-278; R. Merkelbach, *Isis regina, Zeus Sarapis. Die griechisch-ägyptische Religion nach den Quellen dargestellt* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1995) 59-307; S.A. Takács, *Isis and Serapis in the Roman World* (Leiden, 1995); E.A. Arslan (ed.), *Iside. Il mito. Il mistero. La magia* (Milan, 1997) 526-50.

²⁶³ Le Corsu, *Isis*, 227; F. Dunand, *Isis. Mère des dieux* (Paris, 2000) 29-31.

²⁶⁴ Cf. Rutherford, 'Island', 239-40.

²⁶⁵ *I.Philae.Dem.*, p. 9; *I.Philae*II, p. 8.

²⁶⁶ *I.Philae.Dem.*, p. 11; *I.Philae*II, pp. 26-7.

²⁶⁷ *LSJ*s.v.

²⁶⁸ According to its first editor, *I.Philae*I 14, dated to 28 October 142 BC, is the oldest *proskynema* from Philae. However, J. Bingen, *Pages d'épigraphie grecque. Attique-Égypte (1952-1982)* (Brussels, 1991) 136-8 (review of *I.Philae*I, 1970), suggests that this text more probably dates to 89 BC. Bingen also doubts whether other inscriptions of problematic dating are from the second century BC, e.g. he dates *I.Philae*I 23 to 90 BC. See now also his 'De quelques inscriptions pariétales de Philae', *CdE* 79 (2004) 249-56 at 249. Cf. Rutherford, 'Island', 237-8.

wš.t.t was derived from Greek προσκύνημα.²⁶⁹ By using *proskynemata*, the pilgrim placed himself symbolically under the eternal protection of a deity.²⁷⁰

At Philae, Greek pilgrimage inscriptions of the Roman period follow a fixed set of formulae. The most common opening formula is τὸ προσκύνημα, followed by the name of the pilgrim in the nominative (or genitive) case and accompanied by his or her father's name and function. Then the pilgrim mentions the deity to whom the *proskynema* is addressed. He sanctions the inscription with a vow (ἐπὶ ἀγαθῶ, 'for the good') or emphasises his piety (ὑπὲρ εὐσεβείας, 'out of piety'). The *proskynema* may end with the date.²⁷¹

The length of the inscription is usually a few lines, but may also consist of a name only.²⁷² Sometimes the inscription consists of the formula πόδας, 'feet', followed by the name of the pilgrim, and accompanied by a picture of feet.²⁷³ Its symbolism returns in the Greek verb ἦκω 'I have come, I am present', by which the result or goal of the pilgrimage, the presence of the adorant before the deity, is emphasised. This sense is also implicitly conveyed in the aorist variation ἦλθον 'I came', which characterises the state of affairs as being completed.²⁷⁴

The *proskynemata* of Philae do not provide much information about religious sentiments. They only rarely show piety, and then concisely. This appears, for example, from the *epitheta ornantia* of Isis.²⁷⁵ She is called 'goddess' (θεά), 'lady' (κυρία), 'greatest' (μεγίστη), 'with ten thousand names' (μυριώνυμος), 'saviour of all' (πανσώτειρα) and 'lady' (δεσποίνη), which are quite common names of Isis in Egyptian religion.²⁷⁶

In the period of our special interest, the fourth and fifth centuries, the number of Greek inscriptions decreases slightly: only twelve inscriptions date to this period, all dedicated by priests of Philae. Among them are ten *proskynemata*. Of these, four are dedications of feet,²⁷⁷ four are *proskynemata*,²⁷⁸ and the last two are names.²⁷⁹ The phraseology of these inscriptions thus shows continuity with the past, but is equally uninformative about religiosity. What we do know derives almost exclusively from comparison with the demotic graffiti. Doing this reveals the only *proskynema* of the fourth century.²⁸⁰ It consists of a name (Σανσωνῶς), which is accompanied by a more

²⁶⁹ A.J. Festugière, *Études de religion grecque et hellénistique* (Paris, 1972) 178-200 ('Les proscynèmes de Philae', 1970¹); G. Geraci, 'Ricerche sul proskynema', *Aegyptus* 51 (1971) 3-211; W. Helck, 'Proskynema', *LÄ* IV (1982) 1125; J. Bingen, 'Normalité et spécificité de l'épigraphie grecque et romaine de l'Égypte', in L. Criscuolo and G. Geraci (eds), *Egitto e storia antica dall'ellenismo all'età Araba. Bilancio di un confronto* (Bologna, 1989) 15-35 at 20; É. Bernard, 'Réflexions sur les proscynèmes', in D. Conso, N. Fick, B. Pouille (eds), *Mélanges François Kerlouégan* (Paris, 1994) 43-60; Rutherford, 'Island', 237, 240. For examples from nearby Elephantine dating to the Roman period see H. Maehler, 'Visitors to Elephantine: Who Were They?', in J.H. Johnson (ed.), *Life in a Multicultural Society. Egypt from Cambyses to Constantine and beyond* (Chicago, 1992) 209-13.

²⁷⁰ H. Cuvigny, 'Le crépuscule d'un dieu. Le déclin du culte de Pan dans le désert Oriental', *BIFAO* 97 (1997) 139-47 at 139: 'en gravant son nom, et éventuellement celui des siens, dans le sanctuaire, le dévot place à jamais sa personne et la leur sous la protection du dieu'.

²⁷¹ *I.Philae* II, pp. 8-14

²⁷² Cf. Festugière, *Études*, 195, who doubts whether all names are meant as *proskynemata*: 'Chacun sait que la manie d'inscrire son nom en un lieu célèbre est universellement répandue'. See also Bernard, 'Réflexions', 55.

²⁷³ For these inscriptions, see *I.Philae* II, p. 219.

²⁷⁴ On the use of the verb ἦκω and the aorist as completed state of affairs see A. Rijksbaron, *The Syntax and Semantics of the Verb in Classical Greek: An Introduction* (Amsterdam, 2002³) 9, 11.

²⁷⁵ *I.Philae* I, pp. 60-1; *I.Philae* II, pp. 29-30; Rutherford, 'Island', 253-4.

²⁷⁶ H.S. Versnel, *Ter Unus. Isis, Dionysos, Hermes. Three Studies in Henotheism* (Leiden, 1990) 66-7.

²⁷⁷ *I.Philae* II 188-9, 196, 198. Feet are incised beside these inscriptions.

²⁷⁸ *I.Philae* II 190-1, 193, 197.

²⁷⁹ *I.Philae* II 186, 192.

²⁸⁰ Another fourth-century inscription is a dedication from the reign of Diocletian, *I.Philae* II 185.

detailed demotic graffito.²⁸¹ Another *proskynema* is placed next to an almost identical demotic pilgrimage inscription, which adds the function of the priest and the date.²⁸² Just as in the case of the Birthhouse, these inscriptions show that the dedicants made a deliberate choice between the available scripts and that they chose demotic more often in a religious and personal context.

A curse is appended to two Greek inscriptions, both dated to the fifth century. The inscriptions warn against a person who wants to destroy them: "They (the gods) will destroy the family of whoever destroys these letters".²⁸³ This formula has been adopted from demotic graffiti, where it is common in phrases like 'He who shall erase this *proskynema*, his name be cut off'.²⁸⁴ The formula originates from the Old Kingdom and has a long tradition.²⁸⁵ Of the eleven demotic inscriptions containing the formula six are dated, four belong to the third century, one to the fourth and another to the fifth century.²⁸⁶ Apparently, in the special circumstances at Philae the formula was kept alive and eventually transposed into Greek.

Demotic pilgrimage inscriptions of the Roman period are similar to Greek ones in that they contain formulaic patterns. However, the demotic formulas are also different from the Greek ones. For example, although the expression 'I have come' (Greek ἦκω, demotic ρw.f) is also found in some demotic inscriptions, the phraseology differs.²⁸⁷ On the basis of specific phrases, three types of inscriptions have been distinguished: type 1, where only the name is given, type 2, which opens with *t3 wšt.t* ('*proskynema*') and type 3, which starts with *rn.f* ('his name'). Among these, the dated inscriptions confirm the general tendency in demotic that pilgrimage inscriptions of type 3 are found in earlier and those of type 2 in later times, whereas type 1 is used in all periods.²⁸⁸

The most important difference with Greek pilgrimage inscriptions, however, is the attention paid to personal religious sentiments. For example, epithets of Isis in demotic are more common and elaborate than in Greek. In one inscription, Isis is called:

...Isis of Philae and the Abaton, the great goddess, the beautiful noble lady, the beautiful refreshment of this year, giver of wealth, the mistress of heaven, of earth (and of) the underworld.²⁸⁹

A study of the demotic inscriptions has defined a group of thirty-six graffiti by Meroites, distinguished by their names. Although the problem of this analysis remains that people with Egyptian names could well have been of Nubian or mixed origin, it gives a fascinating insight into the use of pilgrimage inscriptions by these Meroites. The 'Meroitic' pilgrimage inscriptions are longer and contain more personal religious sentiments, such as prayers and reports about propitiating the deity, than the other,

²⁸¹ *I.Philae.Dem.* 372; *I.Philae* II 186.

²⁸² *I.Philae.Dem.* 376; *I.Philae* II 188. Cf. Rutherford, 'Island', 237: 'In exceptional cases, the same person leaves two *proskunemata*'.

²⁸³ *I.Philae* II 190.5-7, 191.4-7 (ὁ ἐξαλίφον ταῦτα τὰ γράμματα, ἐξαλίφουσιν τὸ γένος αὐτοῦ).

²⁸⁴ *I.Philae.Dem.* 97, 159.8-9, 269.7-8, 270.2, 289.8, 408.7-8, 416.23-4 = *FHN* III 260, 417.10 = *FHN* III 261, 420.8-9, 422.6, 450.7-9 (*p nt ne-fie ty wšte rn-f gbe* and variants). Cf. *I.Philae.Dem.*, pp. 9-10; *I.Philae* II, p. 223.

²⁸⁵ L.V. Zabkar, 'A Hieracocephalous Deity from Naqa, Qustul, and Philae', *ZÄS* 102 (1975) 143-53 at 150-2, which is basically the same text as his *Apedemak* 106-17.

²⁸⁶ *I.Philae.Dem.* 269, 416, 417, 422 (third century), 159 (fourth century), 450 (fifth century). The expression may have existed much longer at Philae, cf. D. Devauchelle, 'Les graffites démotiques du toit du temple d'Edfou', *BIFAO* 83 (1983) 123-31 at 124, who mentions several examples from Edfu, dating to between the second century BC and the first century AD.

²⁸⁷ *I.Philae.Dem.* 244.2, 410.8 = *FHN* III 249, 416.2, 3, 7 = *FHN* III 260, 421.10 = *FHN* III 245, 449.4.

²⁸⁸ Burkhardt, *Ägypter*: 20-46.

²⁸⁹ *I.Philae.Dem.* 417.1-2 = *FHN* III 261. Other epithets e.g. *I.Philae.Dem.* 255.10-1 = *FHN* III 256, 269.2-3, 359.1, 402.5-6, 416.1-2, 19 = *FHN* III 260. Cf. Burkhardt, *Ägypter*: 71-3.

'Egyptian' graffiti.²⁹⁰ No wonder, then, that the longest demotic graffito in Egypt (twenty-six lines) is found in this group.²⁹¹

The fourth and fifth-century demotic pilgrimage inscriptions do not display these characteristics. As compared with the Roman period, their number decreases even more dramatically than the Greek ones of the fourth and fifth centuries, and twenty-four demotic inscriptions date to this period. They are usually short and not as detailed as the 'Meroitic' texts in demotic, for most of them were incised by the priests themselves. Nevertheless, the formulation continues the practice of the preceding period. For example, two inscriptions have been found with dedications of feet.²⁹² Continuity also appears from the fact that the structure of thirteen graffiti belong to type 2 and only three to type 3, which is in agreement with the general tendency of the Roman period.²⁹³

A remarkable feature of these graffiti, also found in the Greek inscriptions, is that they are dated according to Diocletian years.²⁹⁴ This dating formula is first attested in the epigraphical evidence in a hieratic inscription from the Bucheum at Hermonthis (Armant) in 316/317. The graffiti from Philae are the only examples of this formula in demotic.²⁹⁵ Rather than dating to the reigns of Christian emperors, or using the more common dating formula in indiction years, the last priests of Philae dated their inscriptions to the emperor who had persecuted the Christians.²⁹⁶

An analysis of the Greek and demotic inscriptions at Philae thus 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. Finally, the structure of the inscriptions, although continuous with the preceding period, suggests that the cults had become increasingly isolated. This appears from the distinction between demotic and Greek inscriptions, formerly clearly separated in phraseology, which becomes less clear. For example, the curse formula which was formerly used in the Egyptian scripts is now also found in Greek. Another example is the dating formula according to Diocletian years, which is written in demotic and Greek, and only attested in demotic at Philae. The practice of dedicating long and personal inscriptions in demotic, as we know from several Meroites of the Roman period, is also no longer attested. In the fourth and fifth centuries, almost nothing is known about pilgrims as priests dedicated most of the inscriptions. This phenomenon in itself is yet another indication that pilgrimage to Philae was not quite vibrant as before. It is to the priests, and their cultic activities, that we will now turn.

²⁹⁰ Burkhardt, *Ägypten*, 47-71. In addition, there are seven pilgrimage inscriptions in the Meroitic script (*tewišti*, cf. demotic *tꜣ wš.t.t*), but they are rather short and homogeneous, unlike the 'Meroitic' pilgrimage inscriptions in demotic. See Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions* nos. 95-6, 121-5 = *REM* 0095-6, 0121-5. Cf. L. Török, 'Meroitic Religion: Three Contributions in a Positivistic Manner', in F. Hintze (ed.), *Meroitische Forschungen* (Berlin, 1984) 156-82 at 173-81.

²⁹¹ *I.Philae.Dem.* 416 = *FHN* III 260. See Hoffmann, *Ägypten*, 234-5.

²⁹² *I.Philae.Dem.* 237, 376, accompanied by drawings of feet.

²⁹³ Type 1: *I.Philae.Dem.* 236, 355, 365. Type 2: 96, 194, 211, 259, 332, 351, 364, 369-72, 375, 450. Type 3: 159, 258, 343.

²⁹⁴ *I.Philae.Dem.* 159, 240, 259, 332, 364-6, 369-72, 376, 436 = *FHN* III 306, 450; *I.Philae* II 189-90, 193, 196-9. Griffith seems to have read *I.Philae.Dem.* 320.1 first as a 'year 16', but in the index *I.Philae.Dem.*, p. 215, followed by Bagnall and Worp, *Chronological Systems*, 71, he reads it as a Diocletian 'year 16[.]', that is, a date between 443 and 453.

²⁹⁵ Bagnall and Worp, *Chronological Systems*, 64.

²⁹⁶ Hoffmann, *Ägypten*, 241-2.