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MEROITIC WORSHIP OF ISIS AS SEEN THROUGH THE GRAFFITI  
OF THE DODECASCHOENUS

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BY  
SOLANGE BUMBAUGH

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## Introduction

This dissertation will consider the importance of Isis and her temple at Philae to the Meroitic pilgrims who worshipped her there and left many “adoration graffiti”, also known as *proskynema*, on temple walls throughout the Dodecaschoenus. The Meroitic kingdom was a continuation of the Kushite kingdom that had ruled Egypt as the 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty. After losing control of Egypt, the Kushites ruled their kingdom from Napata at the 4<sup>th</sup> Cataract. In response to a raid by Psammtek II, the Kushites withdrew their capital to Meroe located north of the 6<sup>th</sup> Cataract and present day Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. The relocation of the capital from Napata to Meroe marks the change in nomenclature from “Kushite” to “Meroitic.” Although the Kushites had been expelled from Egypt, they continued to consider Nubia and potentially Upper Egypt as part of their realm. Temple building in this area undertaken by generations of Kushite kings testifies to this sentiment. As with the Ptolemaic and Roman rulers, the Meroitic kings built and added to temples of the Dodecaschoenus to signal their control over the region. While the Meroitic kingdom is first attested at its capital Meroe in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the earliest attested Meroitic graffiti in the temples of Lower Nubia appears in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. The kingdom of Meroe flourished until approximately 300 CE when the Axumites of Northern Ethiopia cut it off from the lively trade with the Romans that had sustained it.

Lower Nubia served as a buffer zone between Roman Egypt and Meroe after they had clashed during the Roman invasion of Nubia from 23-21 BCE. During the next two centuries, as the kingdom of Meroe flourished, the infrastructure in Lower Nubia expanded to the extent that we begin to see inscriptions left in the name of a *pesheto*, the “king’s son” or governor of Nubia along with his subordinates, the *pelemeß* “strategus,” either of the river or the desert, *apote* “envoy or messenger,” and *perite* “agent (often of Isis)” among others. Generally, the pilgrims who came to the temples of Nubia were of the highest level of the administration of the Meroitic king. These officials, belonging to several elite families, authored the many inscriptions found throughout the Dodecaschoenus. As is often the case, religious, economic, and political considerations are deeply intertwined, and the relationship between the administrators of

Meroitic Nubia and Isis of Philae is no exception. Meroe had shown its willingness to physically defend its right to access the temple of Philae and thereby demonstrate political control over the area of Lower Nubia. In the early centuries CE, the concession by Roman Egypt that allowed this access was also driven by economic concerns. Meroe provided Egypt with many raw materials by serving as a conduit for trade from further south in Africa. While acknowledging this political and economic aspect to the religious pilgrimage undertaken by Meroitic officials, the focus of this study remains primarily religious.

### **A. Description of the Content of the Graffiti**

The Meroite-authored inscriptions (written in Demotic, Meroitic, and Greek) found at Philae and throughout the Dodecaschoenus describe cultic feasts and festivals, as well as diplomatic missions on behalf of their king. The longest inscriptions provide great detail regarding the rites performed over several visits made by these high-ranking officials. The lavish beneficence of the Meroitic king is highlighted, especially relating to his donations of gold to the temple in the form of cultic implements. The dated inscriptions cluster around two events: primarily, the funeral of Osiris observed during the month of Khoiak, the fourth month of the Inundation (27 November-26 December) that marked the end of the Nile inundation.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the Festival of Entry (April 24-25<sup>2</sup>), a much lesser known festival, was mentioned in the inscriptions. Jeremy Pope, a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins, interprets the mention (written <sup>™</sup>ΥϞ in Demotic) of this festival in Ph. 416 as referring to Isis' offering of milk libations to Osiris in Biggeh Island. The Festival of Entry would have consisted of the gilding of Isis' statue and its transport over to Biggeh Island at the start of each of the three 10-day weeks where the goddess could witness the presentation of offerings and milk libations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jitse H.F. Dijkstra, *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion: A Regional Study of Religious Transformation* OLA 173 (Leuven-Paris-Dudley, MA: Uitgeverij Peeters en Department Oostersse Studies, 2008), 201.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 208, n. 87. This date is not, in fact, fixed and several mentions of the Festival of Entry are dated to different months. Part of my analysis of Meroitic worship of Isis hopes to clarify the details the celebration of this festival, including its rites, timing, and importance to the Meroites.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Pope, "The Demotic Proskynema of a Meroite Envoy to Roman Egypt (Philae 416)" (paper presented at the annual meeting of ARCE), Dallas, Texas, 23-25 April 2009.

The inscriptions of the Meroitic Chamber seem to describe a visit to Philae by a group of envoys sent by the Meroitic king. Their visit appears to have been part diplomatic mission, part religious pilgrimage. The text, written in Meroitic, cannot be understood fully. Its inscriptions are dated to approximately 260 CE, shortly after the diplomatic mission of Pasan described in Ph. 416. Three primary figures are accompanied by lesser figures and shown a variety of times. An inscription precedes each figure. The brief text probably describes the figure by listing his titles and family relationships in the same manner as the Demotic graffiti left by Meroites. There is also a longer inscription that seems to enumerate the goods that were offered to Isis.

Many inscriptions are left in the name of gold workers who seem to have come annually to gild divine images within the temple. Several ordinary oaths, such as are found on many temple gateways, have been attributed to Meroites and found on the first pylon of the temple.

### **B. Meroitic Religion**

As W.Y. Adams remarks “the religion of Meroe must largely be inferred from its monumental remains.”<sup>4</sup> Millet divides these sources for Meroitic religion into three groups: 1) the great temple reliefs from Naga, Musawwarat, and other sites located in the southern heartland of the Meroitic kingdom, 2) material culture ranging from architectural form to small objects and the minor arts, and 3) the written texts.<sup>5</sup> Due to the fact that the Meroitic language has not been deciphered and that the reliefs found in Meroitic temples generally do not have inscriptions accompanying them,<sup>6</sup> scholars have avoided undertaking in-depth studies of Meroitic religion. Most works on Meroitic Nubia tend to focus on its political relations with Roman Egypt. They describe the military and political interactions between the two powers, highlighting the struggle for

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<sup>4</sup> William Y. Adams, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 325.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas B. Millet, *Meroitic Religion*, Meroitica 7 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1984), 111.

<sup>6</sup> Laslo Torok, *Meroitic Religion: Three Contributions in a Positivistic Manner*, Meroitica 7 (1984), 157.

dominance over the Dodecaschoenus.<sup>7</sup> Less numerous by far are the publications that seek to clarify the religious beliefs of the Meroitic Nubians. Nicholas B. Millet wrote in 1984, “So little has in fact been written about the religion of the Meroites that any summary statement about our present knowledge of the subject must necessarily be a brief one.”<sup>8</sup> Millet continues “Without the evidence of the still-unintelligible written documents, we find ourselves in the awkward position of making inferences about Meroitic religion from cultural behavior, rather than, as most historians can, drawing inferences about cultural values from religion.”<sup>9</sup> His article touches briefly on personal piety by focusing on the inscriptions left by Meroites throughout the Dodecaschoenus and further south; he then turns to the state cults and focuses on the gods Amun, Apedemak (Lion god), Arensnuphis and Sebuimeker (temple guardians and hunter gods), and Mandulis (worshipped at Kalabsha), among others. Finally, Millet considers the Isis-cult while mentioning that the figure of Isis appears in “almost every temple relief in the Sudan” (often as counterpart to Apedemak), he concentrates on Meroitic worship of Isis at Philae. Millet describes the adoration that the goddess receives as being “at once a state cult and the focus of the most earnest personal piety.”<sup>10</sup>

Isis was worshipped at several temples in the Dodecaschoenus, namely Dendur, Ajuala, Dakka, Debod, and Kertassi.<sup>11</sup> Hymns to her are found at Aswan, Philae, Kalabsha, Dakka, and Debod. Through a detailed analysis of the many graffiti left at Philae and the other temples of the Dodecaschoenus, I will seek to answer the questions “Why were the Meroites so tenacious in their dedication to this foreign goddess? What of her attributes and rites appealed to the Meroitic pilgrims who visited her temple?” All of the Meroitic gods seem to have been masculine deities. It is surprising to find no native Meroitic goddess in a kingdom that was so amenable to rule by queens and that accorded such a

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Burstein, “Rome and Kush: A New Interpretation,” *Arkamani* (October 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Millet, 111.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>11</sup> L.V. Zabkar, *Apedemak: Lion God of Meroe* (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1975), 83. Ian Rutherford, “Island of the Extremity: Space, Language and Power in the Pilgrimage Traditions of Philae” in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. David Frankfurter, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 1998): 232.

high-status to noble women. Are we missing references to Meroitic goddesses due to our inability to understand Meroitic or was it because there truly were no native goddesses that the Meroites sought out the worship of Isis?

Worship of Isis is seen in the abundant funerary texts as well as in proskynema. In summing up his publication of the funerary texts found on stelae and offering tables at Karanog and Shablul, Griffith states, “The abundance of funerary inscriptions (buried) with the Meroites agrees with the richness of the Meroitic grave-deposits, and contrasts strongly with the poverty of burials in Egypt in the Roman age.”<sup>12</sup> Because so few religious texts have been found on the walls of Meroitic temples, it is to be hoped that with an increased understanding of the Meroitic language, our understanding of Meroitic religion will be greatly enhanced by the content of these funerary texts.

By undertaking a comprehensive study of the graffiti, hymns, and reliefs and their placement within a temple and comparing these elements across all the temples of the Dodekaschoenus, I hope to greatly expand our knowledge of the cult of Isis. While others have picked up common themes such as the resonance of the milk libation ritual for the Meroites, I intend to undertake a broader, deeper analysis of the cult of Isis as practiced in the Meroitic kingdom. In addition, I hope to add to our knowledge of the Meroitic language by comparing the proskynema left by Meroites with the standard Meroitic funerary formulae in order to ascertain parallel terms and phrases that are employed to address the goddess Isis. Working from the better understood funerary texts to the still poorly understood Meroitic graffiti should clarify standard expressions used in the latter.

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Llewellyn Griffith, *Karanog: The Meroitic Inscriptions of Karanog and Shablul* (Philadelphia: The University Museum, 1911), 83. For a recent discussion of funerary texts, see Abdelgadir M. Abdalla, “Comparison of Meroitic and Egyptian Offering Tables on which are Scenes of Deities Libating.” Paper read at the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of Egyptologists, Grenoble, 1979; idem, *Meroitic Funerary customs and beliefs: from texts and scenes*, *Meroitica* 6 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1982), 61-104.

### C. Worship of Isis Outside of Egypt

General works that discuss Isiac worship outside of Egypt during the Roman period routinely omit Meroitic forms of worship. *The Cult of Isis Among Women in the Graeco-Roman World*<sup>13</sup>, *Isis in the Ancient World*,<sup>14</sup> and other similar books present a survey of the worship of Isis. Their focus is the Greco-Roman world and, therefore, the areas considered are Greece and Rome, the eastern Mediterranean, and Egypt; they even venture into European sites of Isiac worship. They routinely ignore the perseverance of Meroitic devotion to Isis at Philae, even though this place of worship was to be the last great sanctuary dedicated to the goddess. The map in Witt's *Isis in the Ancient World* showing the location of Isiac material found within the Roman Empire ends at Philae.<sup>15</sup> Isis was worshipped at many temples in Nubia as the primary deity of the temple or in a chapel within the temple of another god. Images of Isis appear on funerary stelae, as temple statuary, and as reliefs in royal and private funerary chapels. Thus, it is not for lack of evidence that Meroitic forms of Isiac worship are excluded from general works on the subject. This dissertation will rectify the omission of the Meroitic evidence for the worship of Isis in this crucial period, the time when many former pagans were looking to the new religion of Christianity for solace and strength. While not part of the Greco-Roman world, Meroitic society was contemporary with Greco-Roman society. Meroitic worship of Isis forms an important component of this widespread cult. It deserves to be fully described and incorporated into our common knowledge about the goddess Isis during this period. This dissertation will seek to fill that void by considering the various sites at which Meroites worshipped Isis in order to describe more fully their beliefs about the goddess.

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<sup>13</sup> Sharon Kelly Heyob, *The Cult of Isis Among Women in the Graeco-Roman World* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-7.

## Corpus

### **A. Epigraphic Sources**

The first inscriptions to be considered will be those dedicated at the **Temple of Philae**. Inscriptions attributed to Meroites were left in three languages: 36 in Demotic<sup>16</sup>, 2 in Greek, and 31 in Meroitic cursive script. Within this corpus we see several names repeated and twice a prominent priestly family can be discerned; in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE the Wayekiye family became both prominent priests and administrators of Meroitic Nubia. Later in the 5<sup>th</sup> century we can discern a second family of priests many of whom bore the name Esmet.

Inscriptions attributed to Meroites are concentrated in **three** primary areas of the temple complex of Philae: the Birth House, the Meroitic chamber and the Gate of Hadrian. The clustering of inscriptions is not coincidental. The inscriptions themselves reveal the reasons for Meroitic pilgrimage to Philae. Meroitic pilgrims came as political envoys of their king in Meroe. They also came to perform religious rites and to bring offerings to the temple for Isis.

It becomes clear that the inscriptions were intentionally situated in areas that held religious significance for the visiting Meroitic priests and royal envoys. The Meroitic Chamber, for example, announces Meroitic royal beneficence to the Lady Isis as well as her consort Osiris and son Horus. The Gate of Hadrian had previously served as the western gate to a chamber dedicated to the worship of Osiris. This area served as a launching point for procession to the Island of Biggeh or Abaton as it was known in Greek. This sacred spot was held to contain one of the many burials of Osiris and was the focus of a journey by the statue of Isis to pour libations for her spouse at the beginning of each 10-day week. The Birth House seemed to hold significance as it was there that the divine rule of the (Meroitic) king was sanctioned by Isis. In claiming her as his mother, the Meroitic king claimed his right to rule as Horus whose birth from Isis was

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<sup>16</sup> Adelheid Burkhardt attributes 36 inscriptions at Philae to Meroites. Twenty-seven inscriptions were left during Meroitic rule (prior to 350 C.E). An additional nine inscriptions were left under Blemmye or Noubadae rule after the collapse of Meroe in the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century.

depicted in this part of the temple. I will consider these 69 inscriptions (36 Demotic and 31 Meroitic and 2 Greek) in relation to their location within the temple complex of Philae as well as in relation to the reliefs, wall-paintings, and/or architectural features that surround them on the temple walls with the goal of describing more fully the reasons for Meroitic pilgrimage to Philae. A multi-variable approach like this, which takes into account more than just the graffiti's textual content, makes it possible to extract a great deal more information from the inscriptions. This comprehensive approach to the study of the Meroitic graffiti as an isolated corpus has not been undertaken and is sure to yield promising results.

As a comparison with the Demotic and Meroitic graffiti left at Philae, I will consider similar inscriptions found throughout the Dodecaschoenus. These graffiti were composed in the same three languages employed at Philae: Demotic, Greek and Meroitic. Proskynema have been found in temples dedicated to Isis at Debod, Kertassi and Maharraqa, in the temples of other gods at Kalabsha, Dendur, Dakka and Korte, and inscribed on rocks often located upon hills that probably served as sites of personal worship for the people who left inscriptions there. Isis was worshipped at many temples in the southern heartland of the Meroitic kingdom as well. Through royal inscriptions we know of numerous sites where the Osirian triad was worshipped.<sup>17</sup> An abbreviated list of these temples includes: Isis and Horus of Sai, Isis and Horus of Atiye (Sedeinga), Osiris and Isis of Kawa and Pnubs (Tebo)(both south of the 3<sup>rd</sup> cataract). A small temple of Isis has been found in Meroe<sup>18</sup>and also in Wad Ban Naqa.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lazlo Torok, *Three Contributions in a Positivistic Manner*, *Meroitica* 7 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1984), 157-160.

<sup>18</sup> P.L. Shinnie, *Meroë: A civilization of the Sudan* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967), 84. John Garstang, *Meroë, the city of the Ethiopians; being an account of a first season's excavations on the site, 1909-1910* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911). The first building period of this temple can be assigned to the time between Aspelta (593-568 BCE) and Talakhamani (435-431 BCE), probably to the earlier half of it.

<sup>19</sup> Karl-Heinz Priese, *Der Isistempel von Wad Ban Naqa* *Meroitica* 7 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1980): 347-350.

Located directly west of Philae, **Biggeh Island** contains a temple dedicated to Osiris and is said to contain the burial of his left leg. As might be expected, the temple located there contains many graffiti left by priests in the service of Isis. Griffith's inscriptions Biggeh 3,6,8, and 9 all make reference to Isis.

The first temple to the south of Philae is the **Temple of Debod**. Built by Adikhalamani (200-190 BCE); it was originally dedicated to Amun. After quelling the revolt led by Harmachis in Upper Egypt, Ptolemy V Epiphanes rededicated the chapel to Isis of Philae in 186 BCE.<sup>20</sup> This temple contains no graffiti whatsoever, but its reliefs will be compared to those of the other temples studied.

Located about 12 miles south of Debod, a kiosk is all that remains of the former **Temple of Kertassi** dedicated to Hathor and "Isis of the Quarry." Located 24 miles south of Philae, it is the most likely site of stone quarrying for the buildings of Philae. Bresciani has copied 10 Demotic inscriptions from the temple and Griffith mentions many graffiti, chiefly Greek with dates ranging from 204-251 CE. There are some Demotic inscriptions (Roeder, *Von Debod bis Kalabscha*, I, 221-4, II, Pls. 66, 67). The inscription numbered Kert. 1 (L.D. VI, Bl. 93, dem. 185) was left by a chief artificer and gold worker under a Meroitic king who is commemorated in many graffiti at Philae (Ph. 68, 212, 305, 312, 325). Kert. 2 is left for Isis Prawini (p-r<sup>TM</sup>-wyny), Kert. 3 through 5 are left for Isis of the Quarry.

The **Temple of Kalabsha**, built during the reign of Augustus,<sup>21</sup> was dedicated to the Blemmye god Mandulis. The Blemmye-Nubian rule of the Dodecaschoenus after the fall of Meroe was based in this temple. Kalabsha, the largest temple in the Dodecaschoenus, is noteworthy because it contains several royal inscriptions found on the facade of the hall of columns. Meroitic inscription number 94 (numbered according to Griffith's *Meroitic Inscriptions*), left by the Blemmye king Kharamadoye (first half of 5<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>20</sup> Torok, 162.

<sup>21</sup> This temple was built upon the site of a New Kingdom temple and a Ptolemaic temple built by Epiphanes.

CE), is the longest Meroitic inscription known to date. The Greek inscription of King Silko (approximately 450 CE) is also inscribed on the facade of the hall of columns. There are numerous Greek graffiti, but comparatively few inscribed in Demotic. Demotic graffito Kal. 3 may contain a reference to Isis. Bresciani has identified 18 additional graffiti that were not included in Griffith's publication.

Thirteen miles south of Kalabsha lies the **Temple of Dendur**. Griffith identified one Demotic inscription dated to "the third year of *Swni* the strategus, the Agent of Isis" (L., D., VI., Bl. 62, no. 138)(Blackman, Pl. XLIX). Griffith dates this inscribed oath to 11-10 BCE. A Meroitic inscription has also been found at Dendur located to the right of the door to the antechamber (Blackman, *Dendur*, Pl. LI.).

Arkamani (218-200 BCE), who built the Temple of Arensnuphis at Philae, also built at **Dakka**. He dedicated the temple at Dakka to Osiris and Isis of the Holy Place (Abaton), to Arensnuphis of Philae and to Thoth of Pnubs, the principal god of the temple. It is located approximately twenty miles south of Dendur and five miles north of the small temple at Korte. Naturally, the graffiti inscribed for Thoth predominates, but several inscriptions have been left for Isis. Four Demotic graffiti were inscribed in the names of several prominent members of the Wayekiye family attested at Philae. (Griffith's Dak. 30, 31, 32, 33) (L., D., VI., Bl. 66, no. 154, 155, Bl. 63, no. 142, 143, 144, 149, 153 and 156). It is of interest that these four graffiti are the only inscriptions found on the outer walls of the temple and they are located on the western wall. Griffith notes that this compares to the important graffiti left by Meroites on the western wall of Hadrian's Gate at Philae. Demotic graffito Dak. 7 was left in the name of an agent of Isis. Dak. 12 records an oath sworn between several parties including the priests of Isis of the Abaton and Philae, a first prophet of Korte and an agent of Isis. Dak. 15 was left in the name of "the strategus, the agent of the king, the agent of Isis, the priest of Isis." The inscriptions Dak. 15 and 17 (inscribed for Meroitic King Aqragamane and Queen mother Naytal), Griffith dates to "not later than the first century CE." This makes them some of the earliest known Meroitic inscriptions in Nubia. Dak. 25 mentions Isis of the Abaton and Philae. Dak. 29 dedicated by Selewe "the strategus, the agent of Isis of the Abaton and

Philae.” At Dakka we also find a Meroitic inscription left in the name of the Meroitic king Akinidad. He was the son of the king and queen responsible for rebuilding the Temple of Isis in Meroe. Several inscriptions in Demotic were left on the pylon (L., D., VI., Bl. 64, Nos. 145-48). Griffith dates these to the same period as Meroitic inscriptions found on rocks near the temple; all of the inscriptions are of the Roman period.

The small **Temple of Korte**, just 3 3/4 miles north of Maharraqa, contains an inscription which mentions “Isis of Philae, Lady of Qrd.t” (L., D., *Text*, V. 76). Griffith states that he recorded no graffiti here, and the whole temple has since disappeared.<sup>22</sup>

Griffith records five Demotic inscriptions of late date at **Maharraqa** located 80 miles south of the First Cataract at the southern boundary of the Dodecaschoenus. Isis and Osiris of Philae “in Kem-so”<sup>23</sup> were worshipped here. The graffiti record adorations of Isis, Osiris and Thoth (L., D., VI., Bl. 68, 157-160.) Mah. 1, 4, and 5 are dedicated to Isis among other deities. There are also Greek adorations of Isis with Serapis inscribed at Maharraqa (ibid., Bl. 96, 417-428.).

Edda Bresciani’s *Graffiti démotiques du Dodécaschoène : Qertassi-Kalabcha-Dendour-Dakka-Maharraqa* updates the body of Demotic graffiti for the Dodecaschoenus. She has recorded 51 additional graffiti not published in Griffith’s volume.

Jean LeClant’s *Répertoire d’épigraphie méroïtique: Corpus des inscriptions publiées* (abbreviated REM) will be used as a source for Meroitic inscriptions which mention Isis of Philae (REM 0123, 0332, 0407), Isis of Meroe City (REM 0103) Osiris (REM 0129, 0170, 0504, 1030, 1062, 1067) or the cult of Isis. Some Meroitic texts mention priesthoods of Isis from Karanog (REM 0215, 0326) and Qasr Ibrim (REM 0182).

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<sup>22</sup> Francis Ll. Griffith, *Demotic Graffiti of the Dodecaschoenus, Temples Immersed de la Nubia*, vol. 20 (Cairo, Imprimerie de L’Institut Français d’Archeologie Orientale, 1912), 17. “Cf. Maspero in *Les Temples immergés de la Nubie, Rapports*, I. 10, for a good view and plan of the temple by Laver, ibid. *Documents*, I, Pls. XX, XXI.”

<sup>23</sup> Griffith, *Dodecaschoenus*, 15. For sculptures now surviving, see Junker, *Auszug der Hathor-Tefnut*, p. 51)

## B. Archaeological Sources

The primary archaeological sources will consist of the publications of the major temples of the Dodecaschoenus. These will be used in order to situate the graffiti among the temple inscriptions and reliefs as well as to locate the areas of the temple where graffiti were clustered. This will allow a fuller understanding of the graffiti's meaning to its author. Most of the temples were published in Gaston Maspero's series *Temples immerges de la Nubie*. Griffith's *Demotic Graffiti of the Dodecaschoenus* contains 450 graffiti from Philae. It also gathers graffiti from the smaller temples south of Philae. Gunther Roeder's *Von Debod bis Kalabsche* published his findings for the smaller temples of the northern Dodecaschoenus: Debod, Kertassi, Taifa, and Kalabsha. Henri Gauthier published the *Temple de Kalabchah*,. A. M. Blackman published the *Temple of Dendur* (also Ajuala and Biggeh). Gunther Roeder published *Der Tempel von Dakke*. I will use more recent publications to supplement these earlier archaeological works. I plan to use those works referenced on the Trismegistos website which has excellent bibliographies for all of the known Demotic graffiti.

Because Philae has been so thoroughly published, several texts will be used to elucidate areas of the temple where Demotic and Meroitic graffiti have been found. Hermann Junker's publications: *Das Gotterdekret uber das Abaton*, as well as *Grosse Pylon der Tempels der Isis in Philae*, *Geburtshaus des Tempels der Isis in Phila* and *Stundenwachen in den Osirienmysterien, nach den Inscriften von Dendera, Edfu und Phila*. I will use *Philae, Le Domaine d'Isis*, by Madeleine Peters-Desteract for its sketches of the reliefs. Gerhard Heany provides an excellent description of the history of Philae in his article entitled, "A Short Architectural History of Philae."<sup>24</sup>

### Previous Scholarship on the Topic

Meroitic religion is a huge field in which much remains to be studied. Scholarly works on Meroitic gods are scarce and most publications concerning Meroitic religion are short

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<sup>24</sup> Gerhard Haeny, "A Short Architectural History of Philae," *BIFAO* 85 (1985): 197-233.

articles that offer a brief overview of the subject. Louis V. Zabkar has published a book concerning Apedemak.<sup>25</sup> Janice Yellin's unpublished dissertation considers the role of Anubis in Meroitic religion.<sup>26</sup> Articles have been written on Arensnuphis and Sebiameker, but no in-depth studies have been produced on these gods. To my knowledge no comprehensive study of the Meroitic worship of Isis has been undertaken. Jean LeClant offers an excellent survey of Isiac worship in Kush.<sup>27</sup> However, it is a short article that attempts to cover the Kushite and Meroitic periods together. Only the last 4 pages are dedicated to Isiac worship during the Meroitic period.

### A. Philae Inscriptions

There have been numerous publications of the Philae inscriptions. I will highlight only the most important scholarly publications here. The earliest copies of the Demotic graffiti at Philae were those made by the French expedition under Napoleon in February 1799.<sup>28</sup> In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century numerous scholars made copies of the inscriptions. Most prominent among them was C.R. Lepsius whose expedition surveyed, copied and made squeezes of all monuments in the Dodecaschoenus during two weeks in the fall of 1843 and again upon returning north just short of a year later. His publication can be found in the sixth part of the *Denkmaler*. Heinrich Brugsch made copies of graffiti from Philae, Dakka and Dendur during several visits to Philae and Nubia beginning in 1853. Georges Bendite in 1887, J.J. Hess in 1893-4, and W. Spiegelberg in 1895-6 all copied inscriptions at Philae. The Nubian expedition of the Prussian Academy under Schafer and Junker photographed and made squeezes of the scenes and hieroglyphs from Philae to Maharraqa in 1908-1910. Gaston Maspero's series *Temples immerges de la Nubie* published the inscriptions of the Ptolemaic and Roman temples of the Dodecaschoenus in 1907-1910 and includes *the Demotic Graffiti of the Dodecaschoenus* by Francis Llewellyn Griffith, published in 1912. Upon Griffith's work, I base much of my own. Griffith's *Catalogue of the Demotic Graffiti of the Dodecaschoenus* remains the seminal

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<sup>25</sup> Louis V. Zabkar, *Apedemak: Lion God of Meroe: A Study in Egyptian-Meroitic Syncretism* (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1975)

<sup>26</sup> Janice Wynne Yellin, "The Role and Iconography of Anubis in Meroitic Religion" (Ph. D. diss., Brandeis University, 1978).

<sup>27</sup> Jean LeClant, "Isis au Pays de Kousch" *Ecole Pratique Des Hautes Etudes: Ve Section Sciences Religieuses 90, Annuaire 90* (1981-1982): 37-63.

<sup>28</sup> Griffith, *Dodecaschoenus*, 4.

work on the 450 Demotic inscriptions from Philae as well as those found throughout Nubia. Griffith also holds the distinction of having deciphered the Meroitic script.

### **B. Meroitic Inscriptions**

This script was identified in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and deciphered by Griffith in 1910.<sup>29</sup> By comparing parallel royal inscriptions written in Egyptian hieroglyphs and Meroitic hieroglyphs, Griffith established the value of each character. The Meroitic script, both hieroglyphic and cursive (also called linear) is alphabetic, and consists of 15 consonant signs, four syllabic signs and four vowels. His works on the topic of Meroitic script and language are numerous and include the two-volume *Meroitic Inscriptions*, a series of six articles in the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* called “Meroitic Studies”, as well as commentary on the texts found during the excavation of Karanog and Shablul and Meroe City, to mention a few. Scholars such as Fritze Hintze,<sup>30</sup> Karl-Heinz Priese,<sup>31</sup> Bruce Trigger,<sup>32</sup> and Nicholas Millet<sup>33</sup> have undertaken further language analysis. They have tended to follow Griffith’s lead as they attempt to analyze Meroitic. In the absence of bilingual texts, Meroitic scholars have sought a language to which Meroitic is related. Although there has been much lively debate between the proponents of Meroitic as Afro-Asiatic language (Cushitic branch) and those who claim it is a Nilo-Saharan language (East Sudanic branch), there has been no success in finding a related language. I propose

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<sup>29</sup> Parkinson, Richard. *Cracking Codes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 180.

<sup>30</sup> Hintze, Fritz. His publications on Meroitic language include: *Beitrage zur meroitischen Grammatik* Meroitica 3 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1979); “Die Struktur der ‘Descriptionssätze’ in dem meroitischen Totentexte” *MIO* 9, I (1963): 1-29; *Some Problems of Meroitic Philology* Meroitica 1 (1971): 321-336.

<sup>31</sup> Priese, Karl-Heinz. *Notizen zu den meroitischen Totentexten*. WZHU 20, 275-286; *Notizen zu den meroitischen Totentexten 2* Meroe 1, 37-59; *Zur Entstehung der meroitischen Schrift* Meroitica 1: Sudan im Altertum, 273-306.

<sup>32</sup> Trigger, Bruce. *Two Notes on Meroitic Grammar* MNL 1, 1-4; *The Meroitic Funerary Inscriptions from Arminna West* (New Haven: Peabody Museum of Natural History of Yale University, 1970); “Languages of the Northern Sudan: An Historical Perspective” *Journal of African History* VII, I (1966): 19-25. “Spoken and Written Meroitic: A Note on the Terminal Formulae in the Funerary Inscriptions from Arminna West” *JEA* 53 (1967): 166-69; “The Classification of Meroitic: Geographical Considerations” in *Festschrift for Fritz Hintze, Agypten und Kusch*. *Schriften zur Geschichte und Kultur des Alten Orients* 13 (Berlin: Akademi-Verlag, 1977), 421-436.

<sup>33</sup> Nicholas B. Millet, “Meroitic Nubia” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1968).



view of the northern province of the kingdom of Meroe as it interacted with Egyptian authorities and gods in the Roman period.

#### **D. Meroitic Administration of the Dodecaschoenus**

Lazslo Torok has written extensively on Meroitic administration. In several publications he has used the extensive text and images inscribed in the Meroitic Chamber to elucidate the administrative structure that may have been present in the Dodecaschoenus during the first three centuries of the Christian era.<sup>36</sup> Torok's publication "Economic Offices and Officials in Meroitic Nubia"<sup>37</sup> uses Meroitic language inscriptions from the entire kingdom of Meroe to attempt to define the still imperfectly understood terms for various Meroitic titles. Like the Egyptian temple state system, the many administrators of Lower and Upper Nubia held both civil and priestly titles. High officials in the Meroitic administration of Lower Nubia often held titles that were priestly in name only and seem to have conferred upon their bearer economic control over the resources generated by the associated temples<sup>38</sup>. Such economic power can be seen in the title held by the Meroitic viceroy, Abratoye, whose Greek inscription is on the Gate of Hadrian at Philae. His title "the high priest of Amun in Akin (i.e. Lower Nubia)" probably reflects some sort of supervision over the sanctuaries of Amun in the province. At the apex of his career, Abratoye supervised the Amun temples of 1/3 of the territory of Lower Nubia and of 1/2 of the territory between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cataracts.<sup>39</sup> I would like my study to complement that of Torok. Where he describes the system of economic control of Meroitic Nubia as found in the Meroitic inscriptions of the area, I intend to describe the religious hierarchy and organization of the province using both Demotic and Meroitic language inscriptions. To my knowledge the religious inscriptions inscribed for Isis have not been considered as a corpus in order to infer the structure of the Meroitic temple economy especially as it interacted with Roman Egypt. Several oaths engraved in the temples of the Dodecaschoenus refer to negotiations between the priesthoods of the various temples and

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<sup>36</sup> Laslo Torok, "Two Meroitic Studies: The Meroitic Chamber in Philae and the Administration of Nubia in the 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries A.D" *Oikumene* 2 (1978), 217-237.

<sup>37</sup> Idem, *Economic Offices and Officials in Meroitic Nubia (A Study in Territorial Administration of the Late Meroitic Kingdom Studia Aegyptiaca V* (Budapest: Archaeolingua Alapítvány, 1979).

<sup>38</sup> Torok, "Meroitic Religion," 165.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 166.

will be valuable in sketching a framework in which these priests administered the province. My findings will touch on the political negotiations through which the Meroites were able to keep Philae temple open while the Romans closed every other pagan temple in Egypt during the important transitional period of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Fuller explanations of the structure of political and economic control of Nubia by an extended family of priests and military officers will be sought in the many interlocking inscriptions left by two groups – priestly and princely<sup>40</sup> - who often intermarried. This increasingly literate group of people left numerous texts, primarily funerary and religious (proskynema), which refer to the social and religious organization of the Dodekaschoenus during the Roman period. While these texts have been employed to clarify the economic and military control of the region, my study will add the religious element as so eloquently described in the proskynema dedicated to Isis.

### Chapter Outline

In seeking to clarify Meroitic religious beliefs, I will work from the specific to the general. This dissertation will use the inscriptions at Philae as a starting point, consider the texts and images of the Meroitic Chamber and finally, draw some general conclusions about Meroitic worship of Isis at Philae. The study will then consider Demotic and Meroitic graffiti found in the other temples of the Dodekaschoenus where Isis was worshipped and compare these to the worship of Isis throughout the kingdom of Meroe. The chapters will be organized as follows:

**Chapter One** will consist of a general overview of relations between Meroe and Rome during the first three centuries A.D. and an introduction to the corpus of texts. Based on these texts, I will consider the festivals celebrated by Meroites at Philae, look at activities undertaken by these pilgrims/envoys, as well as the terminology used to refer to the rites performed by them. Khoiak and the Festival of Entry appear to have been the key festivals. The chapter will necessarily consider the shifting political interactions between

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<sup>40</sup> Nicholas B. Millet, “Meroitic Nubia” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1968): 66-165.

the Meroitic kingdom and Roman Egypt as that is documented in many of the proskynema left at Philae.

**Chapter Two** will look at the images and texts of the Meroitic Chamber. I will undertake an analysis of the ceremonial garb worn by the participants by comparing it to that worn by officials from the rest of the kingdom especially the royal iconography. I will attempt to render a fuller translation of the texts as found inscribed on the walls. I hope to be able to describe more fully the reasons for the particular political mission to Philae based upon the texts, the personages depicted and the ceremonial garb worn.

**Chapter Three** will compare the Demotic graffiti left at Philae by the Meroitic pilgrims and pilgrimage graffiti left throughout the Dodecaschoenus by Meroites in both Demotic and Meroitic. I will attempt to elucidate further the formulae used in their proskynema by comparing the component parts of the inscriptions. I hope to synthesize previous scholarship on the language used in these inscriptions and through this detailed analysis to be able to expand our understanding of the Meroitic language.

**Chapter Four** will consider the worship of Isis throughout the Meroitic kingdom as attested at other important temples where this goddess was worshipped in order to gain some understanding of the appeal of this Egyptian goddess to the Meroites. Because the worship by the Meroites is frequently omitted from works that describe Isiac worship in the Greco-Roman world, it is my hope that this study will add this important piece to our knowledge of the widespread adherence to her cult.

### Summary and Conclusion

“The inscriptions found by Garstang at Meroe and Hintze at Musawwarat suggest that literacy was quite widespread near the capital much earlier, and some early texts occur at Kawa, Napata, Sulb, Buhen, and Ibrim. [Millet] is clearly correct in his main conclusion that the replacement of Egyptian hieroglyphic or demotic by the simple alphabetic Meroitic scripts led to a great spread of the ability to write; but it led also, one could suggest, to social changes leading to a decline in centralism based on the royal court.”

Landmarks in Cushite History, Bryan G. Haycock (1972), p. 227.

Taking advantage of the numerous texts produced as a result of this widespread literacy attained by the powerful northern nobility of Meroitic Nubia, I will undertake a study that will increase our knowledge of Meroitic religion, its rites, beliefs, and inspiration. In the process I hope also to shed some light on the Meroitic language as it was used in the adoration graffiti found so abundantly throughout the Dodecaschoenus.

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