

Of all the sites which I saw this summer on a brief archaeological excursion through Egypt, the one which most appealed to me was the small island of Philae with its beautiful temples. Anyone who has visited Egypt is, of course, expected to be overwhelmed by the vast grandeur of the pyramids, the monumental complexity of the great Imperial temple grounds at Karnak. Philae is refreshingly small, and its conventional and simply designed temples are not even of the grand period of Egyptian history which ended c. 1100 B.C. The temples of Philae were begun by a transitory native pharaoh, Nectanebo II (359-341 B.C.), but most of the building was done by the Greek Ptolemies, successors of Alexander the Great, and by the Romans who took Egypt from the last Ptolemy, Cleopatra. Indeed, it is from Philae that we get the very last of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, a system begun c. 3200 B.C. and last seen on Philae in 394 A.D.

The original island of Philae is just south of the present-day High Aswan Dam in the middle of what is now called Lake Nasser. Only about 1/4 mile long and 160 yards wide, the ancient island has been submerged by the rising Nile waters after the High Dam was completed in 1971. The island contained three minor temples, the central temple of Isis with its two great pylons, a temple of Augustus, the first Roman emperor, and a kiosk built by the emperor Trajan in the early second century A.D. Although the cult of Isis seems to have been the major attraction of the island, many tourists appear to give first place in beauty to the kiosk of Trajan, an interesting example in stone of the cosmopolitanism of the Roman Empire and the pervasiveness of native Egyptian architectural tradition.

The true miracle of Philae is to be found today not in the mysteries of the goddess Isis, whose priests last chanted for her in the 6th century A.D., but in the tremendous effort extended by the world community in rescuing the antiquities there from the deluge. As early as 1902 the old Aswan Dam had given difficulties to the site for the first time in its history, covering the island with water for nine months every year. Only in March did the temples make their first ghostly appearance. Thankfully the underpinning of the temples had been strengthened in 1895 by a British engineer. Little real damage was done through these years, though all traces of the original bright paint were scrubbed away. The UNESCO Executive Committee, supported by 44 countries, has put up the money--some 45 million dollars--to save Philae from the new dam finished in 1971.

In March 1971 a coffer dam of steel sheeting was begun all around the island, and slowly the water was pumped from the enclosure, leaving the temples high and dry in their protected pit in Lake Nasser. An island, safely below the High Dam, was then selected and landscaped to look like the original Philae. The temples were then carefully dismantled, block by block, and reassembled on their new location. When I first saw the drained pit in 1977, very little remained to be removed, and my only remembrance of the site was that of a large yellow bulldozer stuck in the mud. A few weeks ago, in the summer of 1981, I was delighted to see the fruits of many years of labour brought to fruition in the new resurrected Philae. Thales, Solon, Plato, Herodotus, Ptolemy, Cleopatra, and Roman emperors all walked on ancient Philae; it is, thanks to an effort at least as great as the effort of original construction, still there to walk upon--at least in a sense.